

# The Loop of Insecurity

*Neoliberalism, gas extraction and resistance in Groningen*



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UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM



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Hasse van der Veen, 3 December 2018.

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the interrelations between neoliberal policies, experiences of (in)security, and (non)resistance. These themes all come together in Groningen, the Netherlands' most North-eastern province, where natural gas extraction has caused more than 1200 earthquakes since the 1990's. Basing my conclusions on four months of ethnographic fieldwork in the province, I will argue that Groningen is stuck in a loop of insecurity. Such insecurity, initially developed by mining-induced earthquakes, continues to be produced and reinforced by neoliberal gas extraction-related policies. These policies centralise individualism and profit maximisation, and in this way create fragmentation, tiredness and feelings of disempowerment amongst Groningers affected by gas extraction. Consequentially, many Groningers refrain from resistance in order to hold onto some sense of self-determination, and therefore security. In this way, neoliberal gas extraction policies are being maintained and the loop of insecurity remains intact. Nevertheless, providing an ethnographic counter-perspective to binary portrayals of resistance versus non-resistance, I will argue that there is a state of action in between, which might be able to interrupt persistent states of insecurity: acquiescence, or 'reluctant acceptance'. Distinguishing two forms of acquiescence: 'passive acquiescence' and 'active acquiescence', this thesis will illustrate that the latter can easily transform into renewed resistance. However, the character of current Groninger resistance yet obstructs the return of a satisfactory (collective) sense of security. While it has achieved considerable successes, especially in 'neoliberal-effective' areas, like the media, the law and 'neoliberal political platforms', Groninger resistance has become fragmented as a consequence of the individualising neoliberal policies and the skills required for such 'neoliberal resistance'. This thesis will conclude that a combination of active acquiescence and a union of Groninger resistance *and* other movements fighting against neoliberal policies might provide the opportunity for finally breaking the loop of insecurity.

*Keywords:* Neoliberalism, (In)security, (Non)resistance, Acquiescence, Natural Gas Extraction, Groningen.



## Acknowledgments

Before I started my fieldwork, I did not expect I would have felt this welcome in Groningen. Even though I was born and raised in Groningen and I knew how friendly and kind many Groningers are, I did not expect that so many Groningers - people from the city as well as from the villages and countryside, administrators as well as home owners and tenants - would want to share their stories with me. Many people invited me to their homes or in their office, often offering me a 'Groninger koek' (cake) and sometimes even offering me lunch, dinner and/or a place to stay. As I have interviewed a relatively large amount of people for a thesis of about eighty pages, I was not able to explicitly refer to all the stories of all research participants - which each were interesting to me and helped me develop a broader and more nuanced overview of Groninger gas extraction and everything related to it. I thank everyone who contributed to this understanding. Furthermore, I was not only involved with my research participants, they were also involved with me. They supported me (not only with research issues, but also personally) and cared about how I was doing. We have developed close relationships, of which I am sure many will continue after my research.

Also others were very supportive during my research process. Gerdt van Hofslot of the regional newspaper 'Dagblad van het Noorden' (DvhN) published an interview with me at the start of my fieldwork in which I called for respondents, especially people who did not actively resist gas extraction and NAM employees. After this interview, also Jan Wildeman of local radio show Havenstad.FM contacted me and offered me to talk about my research plans and to call for more research participants. Thanks to the interview in DvhN, I got in contact with an employee of the NAM, who brought me in touch with relevant NAM employees and gave me access to the NAM office. I was very happy with this access, as it would help me provide a more complete overview of the different perceptions involved with Groninger gas extraction and its consequences. Also many thanks to the (former) NAM employees, who opened up to me and made me understand their perspectives and experiences.

I am very much indebted to the board and other active members of the 'Groninger Bodem Beweging' (GBB). Apart from allowing me to interview many of them, they let me join their (closed) meetings, informed me about upcoming actions and events, and even let me join them at the premiere of the documentary 'Geschenk uit de Bodem' at the Dutch film festival. After a while, members of the GBB, became familiar faces to me, whom I often met at events, updated me and explained everything that was unfamiliar to me. The GBB members often brought me in contact with other research participants, for example 'not actively resisting' Groningers affected by gas extraction. Another person who helped me acquire a broader insight into Dutch resistance and Groninger gas extraction, was Peter Kodde of 'Milieudefensie', who

also named other people who would be relevant for my research. I also thank Second Chamber member Sandra Beckerman, who welcomed me in her office and shared her knowledge and thoughts on my (primary) research findings. Another great help for properly finishing my thesis was Callum Aitken, who thoroughly checked my English.

I would not have been able to write my thesis as it is now without the help of Jelle van der Knoop and Martin and Pieta Ettema. Jelle was my key contact person from the start. He helped me get in touch with active GBB members, politicians and administrators, and other relevant research participants. He also allowed me to place a call for respondents in the GBB newspaper and was always ready to answer all of my questions. Martin and Pieta were two of the people Jelle introduced me to and also quickly became my key research participants. They informed me about events I could attend, provided me access to these, sent me relevant articles and other documents, answered my questions via e-mail, telephone or in person, and gave feedback on my thesis manuscript. But our contact was not only 'formal': Martin and Pieta were always happy to welcome me in their home, have a tea, a chat, and were always pleasant companions during the events that we visited together.

Many anthropologists have expressed they felt lonely during their fieldwork. Thanks to Gaby, Luce, Trudy and Peter, who warmly welcomed me into their homes, I never felt alone. There was always someone to have dinner with, share my experiences with, and at the same time I always had the space to withdraw myself to process everything that happened in 'the field'.

I am very grateful to Tina Harris for her supervision. I could not have wished for a more dedicated, helpful, understanding, and caring supervisor. While the planning was that I would have been finished by the summer of 2018, I needed a couple more months and Tina fully supported me and patiently helped me get through the last few months.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and especially my family for their loving support. The past year, which has been difficult for me, they have unconditionally stood by me, comforted me and helped me maintain a positive spirit. As once sung by Monty Python – having become our family's anthem: 'always look on the bright side of life'.



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*The demonstration at the 'Vismarkt' on 19 January 2018.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction: Villages and Neighbourhoods at Risk**

### *Torchbearers!*

*This demonstration is about something fundamental! We are standing here because our safety is being threatened. Because we have become imprisoned in our own home. We are standing here because the liveability in our villages and our neighbourhoods is at risk. Because we are worried about our future and that of our children. We are standing here because we are entirely fed up with being confronted with the consequences of gas extraction!*

*For years we have been kept on a leash by our gas addicted government and her willing dealers: Shell and ExxonMobil. We are nothing more than a domestic colony. On a comfortable distance from The Hague.<sup>2</sup> And we are really fed up with that! Enough is enough! [...]*

*Slowly but surely everybody becomes aware that everyone in Groningen is being harmed by gas extraction. And tonight you are here in person. And with an astonishing amount! Have yourself seen and heard! It is about us! About our health. About our well-being! It is about our family, our house, our street, our village, our city, about our province. It is about our future here!*

*'Gas terug!'<sup>3</sup> Enough is now really enough! 'Gas terug!'*

*ENOUGH IS ENOUGH! [the crowd yells along]*

- Derwin Schorren, spokesperson of the interest group 'Groninger Bodem Beweging', during a torch procession against gas extraction in Groningen, 19 January 2018.

On a cold winter evening in January, the 'Vismarkt', a big square in the centre of Groningen,<sup>4</sup> had filled with about 10.000 people (*Dagblad van het Noorden* 2018a). These people were there to stand up against natural gas extraction and its consequences: more than 1200 earthquakes since the 1990's (*Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij* 2018),<sup>5</sup> damaged houses, feelings of unsafety

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gic.nl/nieuws/fakkeltocht-ik-dacht-dat-ik-door-de-vloer-zou-zakken>.

<sup>2</sup> The Hague is where the Dutch government is located.

<sup>3</sup> Double Dutch meaning: the termination of gas extraction, and it is a Dutch proverb for 'take a step back'.

<sup>4</sup> City to the northeast of the Netherlands.

<sup>5</sup> These earthquakes are increasing in number and intensity through the years.

and insecurity,<sup>6</sup> and feelings of being mistreated and neglected by the state and energy conglomeration 'Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij'<sup>7</sup> (NAM). The demonstration on the Vismarkt was organised shortly after another big earthquake underneath the village Zeerijp had struck the whole province of Groningen. While this torch procession had annually been organised three times before, this year's demonstration attracted thousands more people. Together they made clear that 'enough was *really* enough'.

But was this big demonstration powerful enough to stand up against the power of the NAM (a joint venture of Shell and ExxonMobil) and the Dutch state, which for years had continued gas extraction despite its consequences? Other actions have been undertaken by Groningers as well, from prosecution to asking for international support. Nevertheless, Groninger gas extraction will still be continued for over a decade,<sup>8</sup> earthquakes keep occurring, and houses are still being damaged, while the necessary housing reinforcement also results in tensions between neighbours. In short, people are still experiencing insecurity in the broadest sense: people feel physically unsafe, but are also insecure about their futures. One of my research participants, Jeany,<sup>9</sup> told me she felt she was caught up in 'endless insecurity'.

Indeed, this thesis, based on four months of fieldwork in the province of Groningen, will argue that Groningen is currently stuck in a loop of insecurity. While initially, mining-induced earthquakes have created feelings of insecurity, neoliberal policies devised by the NAM and the state further produce and reinforce such sentiments of insecurity, instead of taking it away. These policies, for example those which determine damage claim and housing reinforcement processes, centralise individualism and profit maximisation and – through strategies aimed at maintaining these policies - produce fragmentation, tiredness and feelings of disempowerment amongst affected Groningers. As a result, many Groningers do not feel like they are able to resist, and therefore accept their precarious situations. This has enabled the NAM and the state to maintain their policies, which support the continuity of gas extraction in Groningen and thus reinforce feelings of insecurity. In this way, the loop of insecurity goes on and on. Nevertheless, two developments might provide the opportunity to interrupt this vicious circle. Firstly, 'active acquiescence', or 'reluctant acceptance' ("Acquiescence" n.d.) - a coping mechanism that people adopt to maintain some sense of security – energises people and sometimes results into a revival of resistance. Secondly, current Groninger resistance has achieved considerable successes and has attracted other participants. However, while Groninger resistance has increased, it continues

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<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, I will illustrate that insecurity is a broader concept than unsafety, not only incorporating physical unsafety, but also distrust in the 'continuity of [...] self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens 1990: 92).

<sup>7</sup> English: Dutch Petroleum Company.

<sup>8</sup> In March 2018 the Dutch government announced that gas extraction will be terminated by 2030 and decreased before that (see 'epilogue').

<sup>9</sup> Most of the names in this thesis are pseudonyms in order to protect my research participants.

to be obstructed, restricted and divided by neoliberal gas extraction policies. Will Groninger resistance ever be strong enough to end the loop of insecurity?

Multiple scholars have claimed that the term 'neoliberalism' has been overused, reified, and applied in 'one-sided, morally laden' ways (e.g. Chait 2017; Kipnis 2007; Venugopal 2015: 165). Nevertheless, the concept is useful here, as it explains the contradictions between powerful actors adhering to the neoliberal dogma's of individualism (e.g. Harvey 2004; 2005) and 'orthodox' economics (c.f. Mercer *et al.* 2014), and the people affected by the former's policies, who rather point to 'holistic' and 'human-centred' solutions (e.g. Willow 2016). The power contestation that has developed from these conflicting beliefs, is the focus of my research and has led to my main research question: '*Why and how have neoliberal policies related to Groninger gas extraction been maintained, and to what extent are they being contested?*' The answers to this question will provide insight into the *process* of contestation over perceptions of safety, well-being, and (self-)determination. This process is not linear and there is no simple dichotomy of non-resistance versus resistance. In what follows, I will treat resistance as a continuum or dynamic process in which people move in different directions between multiple levels of 'passivity', individual action, and collective action (inspired by Vinthagen and Johansson 2013: 3). Responding to the 'romanticisation of resistance' - the tendency to 'read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power' (Abu-Lughod 1990) - my research will point out that resistance can effectively be obstructed by such 'systems of power', occurs on several levels, and can per individual rise, cease, and revive again.

This thesis will show that Groninger resistance and neoliberal policies are inextricably linked to feelings of insecurity. I will follow Daniel Goldstein by exploring 'the multiple ways in which security is configured and deployed—not only by states and authorized speakers but by communities, groups, and individuals' (2010: 492). My ethnographic account will point out that different groups can hold different understandings of security, which - through policies based on security perceptions of dominant (neoliberal) actors - sometimes result in reinforced feelings of *insecurity* amongst subordinate groups. This perpetuates the loop of insecurity.

As Dutch neoliberal gas extraction policies have mainly been built on and supported by (quantitative) scientific research, which has almost exclusively been commissioned by the NAM and the state (see chapter 5.1), it is important to provide an independent and qualitative counter perspective to the public and political debate. While several scholars have stood up to offer such alternative perspectives, most come from the disciplines of geology and related 'earth sciences', law, and (social) psychology (e.g. respectively, Holland Innovation Team 2017; Bröring 2018; Gronings Perspectief 2018.). The social scientific perspective provided in this thesis is valuable as it highlights the different perspectives of the main actors involved, namely (multiple levels of)

the state, the NAM, and affected Groningers,<sup>10</sup> their interrelations, and where exactly the tensions between these actors arise. In addition to the perspectives of NAM and state supported research, many of my research participants - from NAM employees to affected Groningers - believe that the media provide a one-sided portrayal of the situation in Groningen. By highlighting as many perspectives as possible, and analysing them on a more generalised level (in contrast to the focus on individuals by the media), this thesis attempts to contribute to a wider understanding of the situation in Groningen.

Through the chapters of this thesis, I will illustrate – in figures as well as through ethnographic accounts - how the loop of insecurity has developed, is maintained, and how it can be interrupted. Before doing so, I will reflect on my research methods in the first chapter. Then, in chapter 2, I will introduce the theoretical debates of neoliberalism, (in)security, and (non)resistance, on which this thesis will build and to which it hopes to contribute. In order to contextualise the situation in Groningen, in chapter 3, I will provide a lay out of the events that had occurred before I entered ‘the field’ in September 2017. In chapter 4, I will show how conflicting interests and perceptions of security have led to the production of Groninger insecurity. In the following chapter, I will illustrate how such insecurity is maintained and reinforced through three different strategies: holding a monopoly on knowledge, divide and conquer, and delay. Then, chapter 6 depicts that many affected Groningers have refrained from resistance out of a sense of disempowerment, and resort to coping mechanisms of ‘acquiescence’, in order to bring back some sense of security. Chapter 7 portrays in which ways the remaining Groninger resistance groups are attempting to return a *collective* sense of security: while most contestation is enacted individually, collective resistance has achieved most successes in ‘neoliberal-effective’ areas, like the media, ‘neoliberal’ political platforms and the law. I will conclude looking at the future of Groningen by answering the question: will Groninger resistance be strong enough to break the loop of insecurity? Finally, in an epilogue I will review the events that have occurred in Groningen since I have left the field.

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to keep in mind that these actors are internally divided as well (c.f. Ortner 1995; Zhang 2001).



*An abandoned house in Loppersum, damaged by mining-induced earthquakes.<sup>11</sup>*

## **1. Methodology: Travelling through the Earthquake-stricken Province**

Between September and the end of December 2017, I conducted fieldwork in several villages and cities all over the province of Groningen. As I was born in the city of Groningen and have lived there for twelve years, I had two acquaintances in the city, my friends' mother Gaby and my mother's friend Luce, where I could stay. During my fieldwork, I got to know a couple who turned out to be two of my key informants, Trudy and Peter, who also offered me to stay in their spacious farm in Leermens, a small village in the centre of the earthquake area. As most of my interviews and observations were located all over the province (see figure 1), I travelled large distances by train, local public transport, sometimes by bike, and I was even offered to borrow the car of Trudy and Peter.

I have adopted a qualitative multi-method research design, based on semi-structured interviews, (participant) observations, and a content analysis of a wide range of documents. This approach enabled me to develop a broad perspective on the different actors, practices and events related to Groninger gas extraction, and allowed me to triangulate my findings. My research group mostly consisted of Groningers affected by gas extraction, of which about half were 'active' resisters, but I also interviewed politicians and administrators, (former) NAM employees, and people who can be considered experts on (aspects of) the situation in Groningen. It was partly my intention to focus on these affected Groningers, as the perspectives of politicians and the NAM have dominated and/or influenced research reports (see chapter 6.1) and have extensively been voiced on political platforms and in the media (although Groningers have also increasingly made themselves heard here). On the other hand, the overrepresentation of Groningers in my research is also because these were the easiest to reach, especially the resisters. Nevertheless, it was my aim to talk to as many and as different people related to gas extraction as possible. As said in the introduction, my main interest is the contestation between the different actors involved. Therefore, I formulated my research question as follows: *'Why and*

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<sup>11</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the pictures are my own.

*how have neoliberal policies related to Groninger gas extraction been maintained, and to what extent are they being contested?'. As the main tensions appeared to be between (but also within these groups, c.f. Ortner 1995; Zhang 2001) NAM employees, politicians (and administrators), and affected Groningers, I drafted the following sub questions:*

1. Why and how do NAM personnel justify, maintain and perhaps contest neoliberal gas extraction policies?
2. Why and how do politicians justify, maintain, and contest neoliberal gas extraction policies?
3. Why and how do Groningers justify and maintain neoliberal gas extraction policies?
4. Why and how do Groningers contest neoliberal gas extraction policies?<sup>12</sup>

Before and during my fieldwork, I attempted to reach these actors via my network, and then via the snowball sampling method (Bryman 2012), but also via events I attended and calls in newspapers and newsletters of several organisations. One of my main 'gate keepers' was Jelle van der Knoop, the chairman of Groningen's biggest anti-gas extraction interest group, who brought me in touch with active resisters, politicians, administrators, and experts. Via these people, I got in touch with a wide range of other people. I was also interviewed by the 'Dagblad van het Noorden',<sup>13</sup> the biggest regional newspaper, about my research, in which I mentioned that I wanted to interview NAM employees. The morning the interview was published, the NAM contacted me and gave me access to some employees and their office.

I have conducted 37 in-depth interviews with 45 people, most of them located at the person's home or office and two conducted by phone. I also got in touch with people by e-mail. 26 of my interviewees were affected Groningers, of which about half were 'active resisters' (active for action/interest groups or resisting individually). The majority of these people lived in the 'earthquake centre' (around Loppersum), but I have also talked to many people living in other parts of the province of Groningen. Next to that, I interviewed six politicians or administrators (ranging from the local to national level), two NAM employees, one former NAM employee, and five 'experts'. Almost all of these interviews were recorded and transcribed later. I adopted a semi-structured interviewing method (Bryman 2012), using a question list but keeping the interview free-flowing, allowing for the discussion of unplanned topics. These interviews usually lasted between 45 minutes and 3,5 hours.

Next to interviewing, I used the classical anthropological method of (participant)

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<sup>12</sup> During the writing process, I began to focus on 'maintenance' versus 'contestation', and less on 'justification'.

<sup>13</sup> Translated: the Daily Newspaper of the North.





Figure 1: My interview and observation locations (not accurate) in the province of Groningen. I also conducted interviews and observations in Assen (NAM headquarters), The Hague, and Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup>

observation, in order to examine what people *do* and to check whether this is different from what they *say* they are doing. These observations took on different characters, from ‘passively’ observing in the background, in order to influence people’s behaviour as little as possible, to ‘active’ participant observation, which enabled me to ask people questions in order to make sense of what was happening (Spradley 1980: 59-61). Most of my observations were during protest events, but I also attended more moderate ‘social’ events, like village gatherings, and some politics- or policy-related events, like the presentation of plans by the ‘National Coordinator Groningen’ (NCG). During these events I made notes in my notebook or phone, which were then recorded in reports.

A last method I adopted, was the analysis of documents. These texts ranged from policy-related documents, NAM documents, media articles, research reports, ‘expert’ reports, to documents produced by resisters, which I mostly found online but also sometimes received of my research participants. I analysed these documents with the help of the software ATLAS.ti. This analysis follows an eclectic approach, mostly using the ‘conventional content analysis’ method which ‘focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text’ (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1278), but also implementing elements of other approaches, like *in vivo* coding of grounded theory (Bryman 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Source map: Google Maps.

Like the analysis of documents, I analysed my interview transcripts and (participant) observation notes via ATLAS.ti, comparing them all in one 'Hermeneutic Unit'<sup>15</sup> in order to triangulate and thus ensure the credibility of my findings (Bryman 2012: 390). During the writing phase, I continuously went back and forth between my data and theory development. Here, I was inspired by the iterative process and 'constant comparison' method of grounded theory (Bryman 2012: 387; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

As Groninger gas extraction is a very sensitive subject, it is necessary to reflect on my positionality here. As I am a born and raised Groninger, my research participants likely treated me differently than if I were, say, an Amsterdammer. Nevertheless, as I do not speak a Groninger dialect and used to live in the city, which is very different from the rest of the province, I was still more or less an 'outsider' to most of my research participants. I did not experience this to be a disadvantage, as it made people explain things to me and I was 'distanced' enough to see patterns that most likely will be taken for granted by insiders (e.g. Kerstetter 2012). During the months that I spent in Groningen, after having seen many damaged houses and having spoken to many anxious, desperate, and sad people, I developed a big sympathy towards the affected Groningers. Additionally, I spend much time with resisters because they attended the same events and welcomed me with open arms. Inevitably I developed close connections with these people. This empathy will be apparent in my thesis. However, also employees of the NAM and the state made me understand their perspectives, which I have hoped to portray as well. While these perspectives will mostly be highlighted in chapter 4, I will first turn to my theoretical framework and provide a historical context in the next two chapters.

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<sup>15</sup> A file in ATLAS.ti, including all documents to be coded.



Groninger resistance poster. 'The Hague', the Dutch political centre, is running away.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. Neoliberalism, (In)Security, and (Non)Resistance

This thesis will explore the interlinkages between neoliberalism, (in)security, and (non)resistance. The connection between these theories is not a new discovery. Many others have preceded me here (e.g. Harvey 2004; 2005; Willow and Wylie 2014). Nevertheless, this thesis responds to Lila Abu-Lughod's observation that social scientists have the tendency to romanticise resistance. Inspired by Foucault (1978), Abu-Lughod claims that resistance should not be seen as exterior to power, but should rather be studied as *diagnostics* of power (1990: 42). I will take this a step further by examining power not only through studying resistance, nor its opposite, but also a state in between: acquiescence, or 'reluctant acceptance' ("Acquiescence" n.d.). I will argue that this is a mechanism to cope with the consequences of neoliberalism, which will be introduced below.

### *Neoliberalism*

Since the 1980s, neoliberalism has become a well-known concept amongst social scientists. Some scholars argue the term has been used too often. According to Rajesh Venugopal (2015), 'neoliberalism has become a deeply problematic and incoherent term that has multiple and contradictory meanings', and has been used in one-sided and morally laden ways by non-economists (p. 165). Andrew Kipnis (2007) claims that the analytical focus on neoliberalism risks a reification that 'occludes more than it reveals' (p. 384). Nevertheless, Kipnis does not dismiss the concept entirely, but rather believes that 'neoliberalism should be particularized to show exactly which policies, or traditions of thoughts, or discursive actions the author is defining as neoliberal' (ibid.: 388). This thesis hopes to follow this and aims to use the term as a heuristic concept that explains power contestation in Groningen. Macro processes, like neoliberal developments, have different implications in different local contexts (e.g. Chalfin 2010). By illuminating which characteristics of neoliberalism are relevant in the context of

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<sup>16</sup> <https://winsum.nieuws.nl/nieuws/20170205/groningen-lijkt-klaar-grote-protestactie/>. Source: Hans Marink.

Groninger gas extraction, and also which are not, I am aiming to clarify my understanding of neoliberalism and illustrate its local repercussions.

For the definition of neoliberalism I will adopt David Harvey's understanding: 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade' (Harvey 2005: 2). To ensure such deregulations, according to twentieth-century scholar Karl Polanyi [neo]liberalists<sup>17</sup> have always attempted to disembed the economy from society, meaning that the economy regulates itself and thereby subordinates society to the market. Nonetheless, Polanyi stresses that market theorists have never succeeded in fully disembedding the economy from society, as it would have destroyed mankind (Polanyi [1944] 2001: 3). Instead, countermovements have always risen to intervene and protect society from the disruptive forces of (neo)liberalism. Paradoxically, part of such intervention is done by the (neo)liberal state itself, which often *needs* to manage markets in order to sustain market liberalism and curb resistance against it (ibid.: xxvi-xxvii).

Translating this argument to the present, Harvey (2004) states that, under neoliberalism, the state does not necessarily become smaller – like neoliberalists advocate – but rather its role *adapts* in order to serve capital's success. It does so by privatising assets that were formerly owned by the state (like transportation, natural resources, and social housing) to stimulate capital accumulation, and by diminishing social protection, like welfare provision and social services – hereby adhering to the neoliberal logic of self-reliance. In order to maintain such capital accumulation in sectors difficult to privatise, public-private partnerships are formed in which 'the public sector bears all of the risk and the corporate sector reaps all of the profit' (ibid.: 19). All in all, the neoliberal state has shifted from protecting society *from* capital towards stimulating the accumulation *of* capital (e.g. Harvey 2005; Hudgins and Poole 2014).

In Groningen, neoliberalism has had local implications that in some areas differ from what is described above. Instead of being privatised over the years, as Harvey describes, Groninger gas extraction has been a public-private cooperation since its founding in 1963 – before neoliberalism had become an established ideology. Additionally, since the beginning, the Dutch state has received most of the profit of gas extraction, while NAM employees have told me they felt like the NAM had to bear almost all of the responsibilities (for instance, the NAM had to set up a damage claim system after the earthquake at Huizinge). Nevertheless, Groninger sentiments towards the attitude of the state appear to be similar to what is described above: people affected by Groninger gas extraction feel like the state serves capital instead of its citizens.

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<sup>17</sup> In 1944, Polanyi wrote of liberalism, neoliberalism's predecessor.

Works on tensions between neoliberal energy companies and populations affected by energy extraction point to the contrasting logics these two groups of actors seem to employ (Hudgins and Poole 2014; Mercer *et al.* 2014; Willow and Wylie 2014; Willow 2016). Like Polanyi already revealed, neoliberals adhere to a discourse of economic centrality, while attempting to mute opposing perspectives. For neoliberal actors, the free market and maximisation of economic growth should determine decision-making. Subsequently, decision makers adhering to an 'orthodox' economic logic tend to predominantly think and speak in economic terms using 'science, facts, common sense or compromise', disposing contrasting language as 'unreasonable', 'biased', 'irrational' or 'single minded' (Mercer *et al.* 2014: 290; Willow and Wylie 2014). Likewise, while financial risk is perceived as an investment, the 'unquantifiable' and 'un-priceable' social and ecological risks to local groups are seen as 'mere externalities' (Emel and Huber 2008: 1397; Willow 2016: 777). People affected by energy extraction, in contrast, rather adopt a more holistic perspective, relating well-being not only to economic issues, but also to health, community endurance, political empowerment, and environmental sustainability (Willow 2016: 768). As the neoliberal public and private sectors actively work together to silence such holistic perspectives, it becomes difficult for opposing groups to effectively challenge neoliberal practices.

Another element central to neoliberal thought, is individualism. According to Harvey (2005), the individual freedom of action, expression, and choice is being protected by the neoliberal state and its legal institutions (p. 64). At the same time, 'each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being' (*ibid.*: 65). As a consequence, individuals must solve their conflicts on their own by going to court (*ibid.*: 67). Jean and John Comaroff (2001) claim that this legal system is being 'fetishized' by neoliberal actors (p. 38). According to the Comaroffs, neoliberalism's misunderstanding is that 'legal instruments have the capacity to orchestrate social harmony', while this misses the point that 'power produces rights, not rights power; that law in practice, by extension, is a social product, not a prime mover in constructing social worlds' (*ibid.*). Harvey supports this idea and claims that 'the [neoliberal] state typically produces legislation and regulatory frameworks that advantage corporations, and in some instances specific interests' (2004: 77, my clarification). He adds that access to the law formally is egalitarian but in practice is highly expensive (*ibid.*: 78). As a result, the law has rather become an instrument of the rich and powerful. In this thesis, we will see that the unequally accessible legal system indeed obstructs people from resisting. Nevertheless, by uniting themselves in collectivities, Groningers have found ways to overcome the obstacles to using the legal system.

### *(In)security*

During my research period, the theme of (in)security emerged from 'the field'. While I had not included this concept in my initial theoretical framework, respondents kept pointing to their feelings of insecurity. Here, insecurity is not exclusively a sense of (physical) unsafety, but rather a broader distrust in 'the continuity of [...] self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action', which Anthony Giddens calls 'ontological (in)security' (1990: 92, my clarification). The connection between neoliberalism and insecurity has been made by Daniel Goldstein, who states, 'even as it warns of imminent security threats, the [neoliberal] state seeks to reduce its own role in security provision through expanding individual "responsibilization"' (2010: 492, my clarification). Although the state has thus withdrawn from taking full responsibility for the security of its citizens, Goldstein argues that 'meanwhile, the state appropriates for itself the exclusive right to define and impose "security," with the state authorized to assess risk, maintain secrecy, and control dissent' (2010: 492). At the same time, Goldstein emphasises that understandings of security are not only constructed by the state and other authorities, but also produced, contested and negotiated by local 'communities, groups, and individuals' (ibid.).

In order to study understandings of (in)security and people's responses to such insecurity, I will make use of Anthony Giddens' 'adaptive reactions' to 'ontological insecurity'. According to Giddens, people's ability to cope with dangerous situations is based on the predictability of events and actions. When such predictability diminishes, 'anxieties come flooding in' (ibid.: 98). As a response to such anxieties based on threats that cannot be controlled individually, people hold onto a new sense of fate, or 'fortuna': 'a vague and generalised sense of trust in distant events over which one has no control' (ibid.: 133). In order to safeguard such fortuna, people employ four 'adaptive reactions': pragmatic acceptance ('a focus on day-to-day problems and tasks'), sustained optimism ('a continued faith in providential reason), cynical pessimism ('a mode of dampening the emotional impact of anxieties through either a humorous or a world-weary response to them'), and radical engagement ('an attitude of practical contestation') (ibid.: 135-137). Giddens thus illustrates that people either have the possibility to 'passively' or 'actively' accept their sense of insecurity, or to contest the threats they are exposed to. This framework will be very useful for my exploration of the coping mechanisms that Groningers adopt in order to deal with their feelings of insecurity which have developed as a result of gas extraction (policies) (as discussed in chapter 6). The range of possible reactions to such insecurity will be elaborated on below.

*From non-resistance to resistance, and something in between*

Many scholars place non-resistance opposite to resistance, as static, binary categories of power acceptance versus power contestation. Yet, according to Michel Foucault, power is rather being circulated through individuals, working 'in the form of a chain': 'Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising their power' (1980: 98). Thus, if Foucault is right, individuals can both submit themselves to power as well as oppose it and exert it themselves, at different moments in time. This thesis will illustrate that power and its contestation indeed are dynamic: non-resistance and resistance are fluid instead of binary categories. There is a state of action that lies *between* non-resistance and resistance, which I call acquiescence: 'the reluctant acceptance of something without protest' ("Acquiescence" n.d.). Such acquiescence on the one hand is a submissive reaction in order to cope with domination, but on the other hand facilitates the transition from a 'passive' reaction to an active, contestatory one (see chapter 6).

Antonio Gramsci's theory of 'hegemony' (1971), which has often been associated with non-resistance, recognises the fine line between power acceptance and contestation. Hegemony is often defined in the direction of: 'the supremacy of one group or class over other classes or groups', which is established through 'the exercise of moral and intellectual leadership over allied and associated groups, and of the exercise of domination—"even with armed force"—in order to subdue antagonistic groups' (Fontana 2008: 84-85). Thus, while on the one hand, it is a process in which consent is produced, mobilised and maintained, on the other hand, it is a realm in which different systems of belief and knowledge oppose and compete each other (ibid.: 94).

In order to then understand Groninger resistance, literature on New Social Movement (NSM) theory can be of help. NSM scholars have described 'new social movements', which emerged from the 1960s on, as moving beyond the economic interests of 'traditional' labour movements, incorporating human and political rights, and social dignity (Gledhill 2000: 159; Petras and Morley 1990). These NSM's prefer to operate outside of traditional bureaucratic structures, and rather aim to create 'free spaces' in which they can try out new, 'non-traditional' practices, like the use of 'serious alternative media' (respectively: Goodwin and Jasper 2015: 156; Evans and Boyte 1986: 191). Groninger resistance has also attempted to make use of less traditional spaces, like the media and the law, in which they can move more freely than within traditional structures, like the political system. Additionally, Groninger resistance groups have incorporated themselves within *new* political structures with traditional *and* non-traditional political actors (politicians and administrators belonging to the former group, and corporate actors and civil society organisations to the latter), which I will later call 'neoliberal political

platforms'.<sup>18</sup> While subordinate or less powerful groups inevitably often are influenced and constrained in their actions by 'the powerful' (e.g. De Certeau 1984), this thesis will demonstrate that the former will also be able to occupy and (help) create new spaces and use these for their own interests.

John Gledhill (2000) reminds us that social movements are often *internally* divided and usually do not represent a homogenous group (p. 90). Therefore, when investigating social movements, the 'internal politics', like internal domination and contradictions, should be taken in mind as well (Ortner 1995; Zhang 2001). This thesis will illustrate how external factors, like divide and conquer strategies by the NAM and the state, as well as internal aspects, like differences in financial and 'human' capital,<sup>19</sup> have fragmented Groninger resistance. The investigation of how such fragmentation is exactly produced, will provide insight into how loops of insecurity are being maintained and reinforced, but also how they can be interrupted.

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<sup>18</sup> Political platforms, like negotiation tables, in which politicians, (multinational) corporations and civil society organisations (in)directly participate in order to protect their 'individual' interests (based on the neoliberal doctrine of individual self-responsibility).

<sup>19</sup> By 'human capital', I mean (acquired) skills, knowledge and experience (e.g. Becker 1964; Smith 1776).





*A gas extraction site in Leermens.*

### **3. The Biggest Bubble in the World**

Since the discovery of the Groninger gas bubble in 1959, then the biggest bubble in the world, Groningen has become a major site for the extraction of natural shale gas. Providing for about seventy percent of the Dutch gas supply, the energy conglomeration NAM (existing of ExxonMobil and Shell) has rapidly extracted large amounts of gas from the Groninger soil since the 1960's. As this supply steadily began to be emptied, since 1990's more than a thousand earthquakes have occurred in the province ("Shored-up homes" 2016). Initially, these quakes were small and barely noticeable, but later intensified to magnitudes reaching up to 3.6 on the Richter scale. The northeast of Groningen has taken most of the hits, as most gas has been extracted in this area (see figure 3). Here, houses have become heavily damaged, and had to be shored-up to keep them standing (see figure 4). Sometimes houses even have to be broken down and/or reinforced, as they had become too dangerous for people to live in. This chapter will provide a historical context to which events, policies, and processes have got it to this point, and how Groningers have responded to these.

The gas field underneath the province of Groningen was discovered in 1959. The 'Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij' (NAM), a cooperation of the Dutch Shell and American ExxonMobil,<sup>20</sup> had been digging for oil and to their disappointment found the much less profitable gas (Stiller 2018: 101). Nevertheless, after several test drillings, they realised that they had found a gas bubble of at least 300 billion cubic meters, then the biggest gas field in the world (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 29) (see figure 2).<sup>21</sup> After ExxonMobil's engineer Douglass Stewart had realised the Groninger gas bubble could supply all Dutch households with energy, Dutch houses were connected to the Groninger gas field in an astonishingly fast speed (*ibid.*: 46). This largely improved the comfort of these households as people did not have to cook on dirty coal anymore and heating and 'warm water supplies' improved greatly. Also other European

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<sup>20</sup> Back then, Shell was still called 'de Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij', and ExxonMobil 'Standard Oil Company of New Jersey'.

<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the size of the gas field has been estimated to be about 2900 billion cubic meters (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 30).



Figure 2: Location and size of the Groninger gas field.<sup>22</sup>

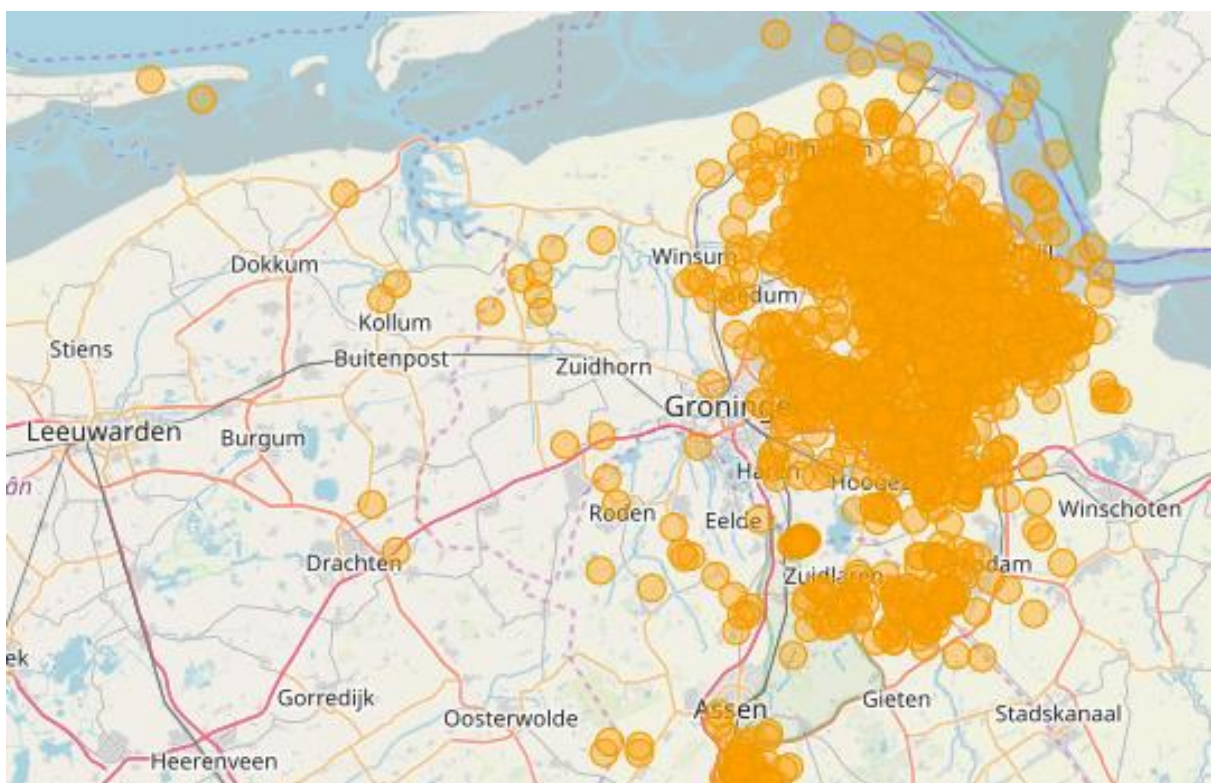


Figure 3: Locations of the earthquakes between 26 December 1986 and 28 September, 2018.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ftm.nl/uploads/cache/optimjpg/uploads/media/5714ab6e21b05/locatie-groninger-gasveld-c-nam-2016.jpg>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://rdsa.knmi.nl/dataportal/>, last accessed 28 September 2018.

households and industries began to run on Groninger gas: in 1974 the Netherlands exported 41 billion cubic meters, as much as its national consumption (Stiller 2018: 154-157). Shortly after the discovery of the gas bubble, the Dutch state began to interfere in the Groninger gas extraction. In 1963, the Dutch state, Shell, ExxonMobile, and the NAM signed an 'Agreement of Cooperation', in which they secured their public-private cooperation. This agreement has been secret until the document got leaked in January 2018 (which will be discussed in the 'epilogue' of this thesis). With the signing of the agreement, the 'Maatschap Groningen'<sup>24</sup> was formed, with the NAM having 60 per cent of the shares, and EBN, the state-owned energy company, 40 per cent (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 38-39).<sup>25</sup>

From 1962 on, suspicions arose about soil subsidence<sup>26</sup> as a consequence of gas extraction. In 1963, the NAM started secret research on soil subsidence. Only in 1971, a report was published, reporting that subsidence of about a meter was being expected in Groningen. Nevertheless, the NAM claimed that this would occur evenly, due to which no damage would be caused. The NAM upheld this argument until 1993 (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 58). In 1986, the earth shook heavily in Assen, the capital of Drenthe, the province south to Groningen. After this earthquake of 2.8 on the Richter Scale in Assen, but already voicing warnings since the 60's, engineer Willem Meiborg and two others established 'Willem Beton', the first action group against gas extraction. The critiques of this group were not taken seriously at all. Willem, the grandson of Meiborg: 'my grandfather was blasphemed as if he were a loony. He had a very good reputation in Groningen, but the NAM broke that down' (*ibid.*: 69). Only in 1993, several experts, including those of the NAM and the state supervisory organ 'Staatstoezicht op de Mijnen'<sup>27</sup> (SodM), admitted that gas extraction could lead to earthquakes in 'certain occasions' (*ibid.*: 21). Nevertheless, the report stated: '... even in the most inconvenient case, there is only a small chance for light damage to constructions in a limited area around the epicentre' (Begeleidingscommissie Onderzoek Aardbevingen 1993: 67).

As the number and magnitude of earthquakes began to increase through the years, critiques on Groninger gas extraction also began to intensify. Nevertheless, perhaps partly due to the ridiculing of opposing views by the NAM, like those of the Willem Beton group, gas extraction could be continued and even scaled up without a problem. Only a couple of years before the biggest earthquake up until now, which occurred in 2012 underneath Huizinge, things slowly began to change in Groningen. After an earthquake of 3.5 on the Richter scale underneath Westeremden in 2006, a concerned group of inhabitants got together and eventually founded

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<sup>24</sup> Translated: 'the Groninger partnership'.

<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, through the tax system, the state eventually receives about 90 per cent of the gas yields, and the NAM 10 per cent (Knegt and Van der Weg 2018).

<sup>26</sup> 'The sinking or settling of the ground surface' (Colorado Geological Survey, n.d.).

<sup>27</sup> In English: 'State Supervision on Mines'.

the 'Groninger Bodem Beweging' (GBB) in 2009. This interest group advocated for the interests of its members with damage (financially *and* emotionally) caused by the consequences of Groninger gas extraction (Groninger Bodem Beweging n.d.).<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, in the first years, this group only had a couple of hundred members. This all changed after the big earthquake underneath Huizinge, with 3.6 on the Richter Scale.

The earthquake underneath Huizinge of 16 August 2012 was described as a turning point by almost all of my research participants. Shortly after the big quake, the NAM received 1900 damage claims. The rest of the Netherlands finally started becoming aware of the troubles in Groningen, as the earthquake attracted much media attention. A couple of months later, the SodM published a shocking report in which it warned for even bigger earthquakes in the future (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 11). Nevertheless, Henk Kamp, Minister of Economic Affairs, did not immediately want to reduce gas extraction and first commissioned fourteen different studies. In the meantime, in the year after 'Huizinge', the gas extraction level was increased to the highest level in years instead of reduced, justified by that year's cold winter and the lower than expected gas extraction in smaller gas fields (Kamp 2015: 4). Additionally, Henk Kamp declared that tens of thousands of houses would need to be reinforced (Stiller 2018: 78). These two decisions, together with the shock created by the earthquake, stirred the growth of Groninger resistance.



Figure 4: A shored-up house in Groningen.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Later, the focus shifted to the broader topic of safety of 'all Groningers'.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/nam-aansprakelijk-gesteld-voor-psychisch-leed-na-beving-dit-is-een-doorbraak-~be6b2137/>. Original source: Kees van de Veen.

Next to the GBB, other action and interest groups began to form, like ‘Schokkend Groningen’, ‘Stichting WAG’, and ‘Houd Groningen Overeind’. On March 1<sup>st</sup> 2014, ‘de Dialoogtafel’ was founded, a platform in which the GBB, other civil society organisations, Groninger administrators, the NAM, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs would discuss the problems related to the gas extractions (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 213). Nevertheless, this platform was already abolished on 1 January 2016 due to dissatisfactions by the civil society organisations, which reunited in the ‘Groninger Gasberaad’ (minus the GBB).

In the meantime, many affected Groningers voiced their discontent with the damage claim process (or damage protocol) as designed and executed by the NAM. In 2015, a research report presented that forty per cent of the damage claimants was either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the process (APE 2015: i). Damage claim processes were slow and NAM inspectors often classified the damage as non-related to gas extraction, due to which such damage would not be compensated (Stiller 2018: 26). As a response to the criticism on the damage claim processes, in January 2015, the ‘Centrum Veilig Wonen’ (CVW)<sup>30</sup> was founded by the Ministry of Economic Affairs. This organisation would take over the NAM’s task of recovering earthquake damages of houses and buildings in Groningen (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 213). A month later, a critical report by the ‘Research Council for Safety’<sup>31</sup> stated that the Dutch state and the NAM had prioritised profit maximisation above the safety of Groningers (Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid 2015). Subsequently, in order to make Groningen ‘safer and future proof’, in May 2015 the ‘National Coordinator Groningen’ (NCG) Hans Alders was appointed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Brandsma *et al.* 2016: 97). The NCG meets regularly with the ‘Social Steering Group’ (GBB and Groninger Gasberaad) and the ‘Administrative Steering Group’<sup>32</sup> (twelve ‘earthquake municipalities’, the Province and the national state) to be advised on gas extraction-related policy decisions.

Yet many Groningers remained dissatisfied by the lack of change in their situation, and continued standing up for their interests in several ways, for example by using the legal system and attracting the media. In November 2015 this led to a big success: the ‘Council of State’<sup>33</sup> decided that Groninger gas extraction should be limited to 27 billion cubic meters (instead of the proposed 30-33 billion m<sup>3</sup>), in response to prosecution by over 40 parties, including the Province of Groningen and Groninger municipalities (Raad van State 2015). Furthermore, due to persistent criticism, on March 31<sup>st</sup> 2017, the NCG reported that from then on the NAM and CVW (which was believed to be controlled by the NAM) would not be responsible anymore for the processing of damage claims and would be taken over by an independent committee (“NAM

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<sup>30</sup> In English: ‘Centre Safe Living’.

<sup>31</sup> In Dutch: ‘Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid’.

<sup>32</sup> In Dutch: ‘Maatschappelijke Stuurgroep’ and ‘Bestuurlijke Stuurgroep’.

<sup>33</sup> In Dutch: ‘Raad van State’.

stapt uit” 2017). Also, the NAM’s ‘damage protocol’ was put on hold, meaning that no new damage claims would be processed until a new damage protocol was accepted by all parties involved. This lasted until January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018 (see ‘epilogue’).

In April 2017, other big changes were set in motion. On April 18<sup>th</sup>, The Minister of Economic Affairs decided – pressured by the advice of the State Supervision on Mines - that the gas extraction should be reduced by 10 percent from 24,4 billion cubes to 21,6 billion cubes from October 2017 on (“Kabinet verlaagt gaswinning” 2018). Two days later, the Court of Justice in Arnhem-Leeuwarden decided that a criminal investigation would be held against the NAM, as the court believed there were indications that the conglomeration is guilty of damaging houses to a life threatening level (Wind 2017). Also in April, the GBB was invited to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva to talk about the gas extraction-related problems in Groningen (Jaspers and De Jong 2017). In July, the committee published a document in which it requested the Dutch state to ensure the physical safety and the mental health of Groningers (“VN: Nederland moet” 2017).

It should be noted here that Groningers – and inhabitants of other peripheral areas of the Netherlands – have already felt marginalised before the consequences of Groninger gas extraction began to be felt. However, what is significant about the current situation in Groningen is its scale and the fact that ultimately *everybody* in north-east Groningen, but also other parts of Groningen and even the neighbouring provinces Friesland and Drenthe, is affected by Groninger gas extraction: countryside *and* city, poor *and* rich. While previously, mostly lower-class inhabitants of the Groninger countryside felt neglected by the state – multiple people told me this was exactly why a big communist bulwark had formed in the East of Groningen after the Second World War – now a bigger and more diverse group of people throughout the entire province feels this way.

A last important event worth mentioning occurred when I had already started my fieldwork: on 26 October 2017, a new Cabinet and thus new Minister of Economic Affairs was presented. The new Minister Eric Wiebes declared that Dutch decision making related to Groninger gas extraction was ‘a Dutch state failure of un-Dutch proportions’ (“Minister Wiebes” 2017). Minister Wiebes appeared to show more decisiveness than his predecessor Henk Kamp, as he expressed his intentions to accelerate decision making related to Groninger gas extraction. Because of this, at first some of my research participants hoped the new Minister would bring back some sense of security. Unfortunately, the following chapter will illustrate how conflicting perceptions of security between the state and the NAM on the one hand, and Groningers affected by gas extraction on the other, continue the production of insecurity amongst the Groninger population.



*Minister Wiebes in front of Groningers in the Second Chamber.<sup>34</sup>*

## 4. Producing Insecurity

This chapter will examine the beginning of the insecurity loop: how conflicting interests and perceptions of security underlying gas extraction policies have further produced and developed feelings of insecurity, initially created by mining-induced earthquakes. While the first paragraph reveals the *internally* conflicting responsibilities and interests of the national state, the second paragraph will mainly highlight the contrasting security perceptions *between* the NAM and the state on the one hand, and Groningers affected by gas extraction on the other. The gap between the interests and perceptions of the different stakeholders of gas extraction will illustrate why gas extraction policies have diverged so far from the interests of affected Groningers and thus have further developed their feelings of insecurity.

### 4.1 The multiple responsibilities of the national state

*If you're watching an average newscast [...], it is always about safety and the maintenance of safety, the identification of safety, etcetera etcetera. But north of Assen that regime stops. And here, because there is gas underneath the ground, there are different rules. And suddenly the Dutch government looks away.*

- Kees Houtman, homeowner affected by Groninger gas extraction.

Like Kees, many people told me they felt like the Dutch government prioritised other interests above the safety of Groningers. One of these interests, as openly expressed by the government, is the so-called 'security of supply'. This is the guarantee of the sufficient supply of gas to all Dutch people, many industries, and foreign households and factories. Many people told me the security of supply argument, which formally justifies the maintenance of the current gas production level,

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.rd.nl/vandaag/politiek/kamer-gunt-wiebes-nog-tijd-voor-schaderegels-1.1460751>.  
Original source: ANP.

actually obscures another underlying reason for not lowering Groninger gas extraction: the economic interests of the state and other influential parties, like the NAM and other gas-related companies. For the latter, these economic interests simply mean profit maximisation, for the state, these imply the interest of balancing income and expenses of the national treasury.

After the Huizinge earthquake of 2012, the 'Council of State' has repeatedly ordered the state to downscale the gas production. Because of this, the gas yields have become a substantially smaller proportion of the Dutch state treasury. Nevertheless, the Dutch government continued to justify Groninger gas extraction with the security of supply argument. After the Huizinge quake, Dutch leaders maintained that gas production could not be lowered because of the dependence of Dutch citizens and international households - as well as big industries - on the Groninger gas supply. Up until the writing of this thesis in 2018, this argumentation was continuously repeated. To exemplify, a high official of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate (EAC)<sup>35</sup> told me:

It is possible to stop gas extraction [...]. However, at the Ministry we are also here to serve other public interests. The last three, four years two public interests have been very dominant: the public interest of safety versus the public interest of security of supply.

A similar argumentation has from 2012 till present been expressed by several important decision makers, including the previous minister of Economic Affairs (EA) Henk Kamp, the minister president Mark Rutte, and the present minister of Economic Affairs and Climate (EAC) Eric Wiebes. This justification often follows a line of reasoning similar to the president's statement in a talk show: 'if you would now say, I'll shut off the gas valve, then the Netherlands will suffer the cold'.<sup>36</sup> The Ministry of EAC official expanded this argumentation to a wider European level:

In principle, we don't differentiate between Dutch households, Belgian households and German households. [...] [T]hese countries are really dependent on Groningen gas. [...] Imagine, households or hospitals or whatever in Germany or Belgium remaining without gas. Well, these are also people.

Through the years after Huizinge, when the gas production was increasingly forced to be decreased, the Dutch government, and especially the Ministry of Economic Affairs, struggled to balance the two public interests of protecting the safety of Groningers while safeguarding the

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<sup>35</sup> With the new Cabinet of October 2017, the Ministry of Economic Affairs changed names to 'the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate'.

<sup>36</sup> Pauw & Jinek, 6 March 2017: [https://www.npo.nl/pauw-jinek-de-verkiezingen/06-03-2017/KN\\_1689034](https://www.npo.nl/pauw-jinek-de-verkiezingen/06-03-2017/KN_1689034).



security of supply principle. With this justification, for years, even on different gas production levels (from 30 billion cubic meters in 2015 till the level of 21,6 in start 2018) the state and its responsible bodies kept claiming that the lowest production level possible was maintained in order to guarantee security of supply (Hoevenaars 2015; Kleinneijenhuis 2018).

Conflicting interests between authorities and Groninger inhabitants have obstructed further decrease of gas production in Groningen. Here too, economic interests of the state and the NAM appear to influence decision making. The Ministry of EAC official told me that until around 2013/2014, the Dutch treasury played some role in decision making. After that, according to him, 'at least the past 2,5 years the budgetary interest has had no influence in any way'. Nevertheless, many people I have spoken to have the feeling economic interests continue to play an important role in Dutch decision making considering gas extraction. It is understandable they feel that way. Firstly, to many people it appears that the NAM and/or its stake holder Shell have had considerable influence in the decision making of the government. Peter Kodde, employee of the environmental organisation 'Milieudefensie', told me that behind the scenes, Shell has threatened that it would 'pull the plug' and stop paying damage claims, if gas extraction would drop below 20 billion cubic meters per year.<sup>37</sup> Also, in a leaked document in which the NAM director Gerald Schotman answered gas extraction related questions posed by minister president Rutte, Schotman writes that:

The reduction of the extraction to the level of security of supply will have the consequence that a large part of the left over gas won't be extracted (around 400 billion cubic metre). NAM is owner of this gas which has a value of 60 – 80 billion euros. Apart from the loss of income as a consequence of the loss of natural gas yields, the NAM will, in case reduction of extraction is not motivated by a security perspective, as expected submit a damage claim for infringement of property right and will challenge related decision via administrative law. (Schotman 2017)

Here, Schotman does not explain what he exactly means by 'security perspective'. What does become clear, is that it is against the NAM's interest to extract gas on a level that only meets the interest of security of supply, and not the interest of profit maximisation – and therefore the NAM (financially and legally) pressures the state to ensure gas extraction above the level of security of supply.

Another indication that it is against the financial interest of the state to drastically lower gas extraction, is that the transition to other forms of energy costs a lot of money. The building of a new nitrogen plant, where high calorie gas from abroad will be mixed with nitrogen so the

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<sup>37</sup> Paraphrased, as the interview with Peter was not recorded.



Figure 5: Minister Wiebes saying: 'As you can see: safety comes first! ... A close second is ..'. On the elephant leg is written: 'economic interests' (Groninger Bodem Beweging 2018b: 9).

substance can be used in the Dutch energy infrastructure, is estimated to cost around 480 million euro (Kamp 2016: 1).<sup>3839</sup> On top of that, this gas from abroad needs to be imported, which naturally also costs more money. In order to directly run Dutch households and industries on such foreign gas – instead of first mixing it with nitrogen - the government could also choose to convert equipment in order to run it on higher calorie gas. Nevertheless, GBB chairman Jelle van der Knoop told me this would raise government costs in two ways: 'you would say the government has to pay [for the conversion of equipment]' [my clarification]. Additionally, the government profits from the consumption of Groninger gas, as it receives about ninety per cent of the Groninger gas yields.

Lastly, GasTerra, the company that trades Groninger gas and is 50 per cent owned by the state, 25 per cent by Shell and 25 per cent by ExxonMobil, has energy supply contracts with other countries. Jelle told me that if these contracts will be broken, it will cost the Dutch state a lot of money as it will most probably lead to legal procedures which those countries dependent on Groninger gas will most likely win. Nevertheless, in February 2018 the NOS reported that some foreign countries received more Groninger gas than needed. France for example mixed three quarters billion cubic Groninger gas in such a way that it could be used as high caloric gas (Ekkker and Hofs 2018). Already in 2016, energy company Engie, which supplies to France and Belgium, reported that it wished to buy less Groninger gas but was obstructed by GasTerra,

<sup>38</sup> Groninger gas contains a lower caloric value than gas from for example Russia or Norway.

<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, in March 2018, as a consequence of the Cabinet's decision to terminate Groninger gas extraction by 2030, it is reported that Minister Wiebes will commission the building of such a nitrogen plant (*Dagblad van het Noorden* 2018b).

which pointed to their contract (“Energiebedrijf Engie wil” 2016). Instead of thus stimulating the discontinuance of these contracts, Gasterra, and thus partly the state, appeared to follow its financial interests.

All in all, even if the Dutch treasury is not so much dependent anymore on the Groninger gas yields, there are still many economic interests which obstruct the Dutch state from reducing gas production. Even though it is not completely clear which economic interests are actually playing a big role, and to what extent the state has been influenced by the NAM/Shell, it is clear the state had to deal with multiple, contrasting interests in their decision making related to Groninger gas extraction. The balancing of these conflicting interests implies the adoption of a cost-benefit analysis, typical for neoliberal thinking (e.g. Collins and Jimenez 2011; Finewood and Stroup 2012; Willow 2016). In this cost-benefit analysis, the conflicting interests are converted to quantifiable numbers, which can be weighed against each other. On the benefit side the security of supply to Dutch and European households and industries are placed, along with the economic benefits of gas extraction. On the other, cost side, are the safety risks to Groningers. The security of supply can easily be quantified in imaginable amounts of people. Even though often administrators do not literally express these amounts, they are talking about ‘the Netherlands’, and ‘Belgian’ and ‘German households’, which are entities bigger than the province Groningen alone. Economic benefits can also effortlessly be quantified in amounts of profit. Groninger safety, nevertheless, is according to many of my research participants more difficult to quantify and therefore embed in a cost-benefit calculation. While the NAM claims that ‘group risk – the social effects and cost-benefits [...] are quantifiable’ (Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij 2015: 1), many Groningers believe that the NAM and the state fail to recognise the

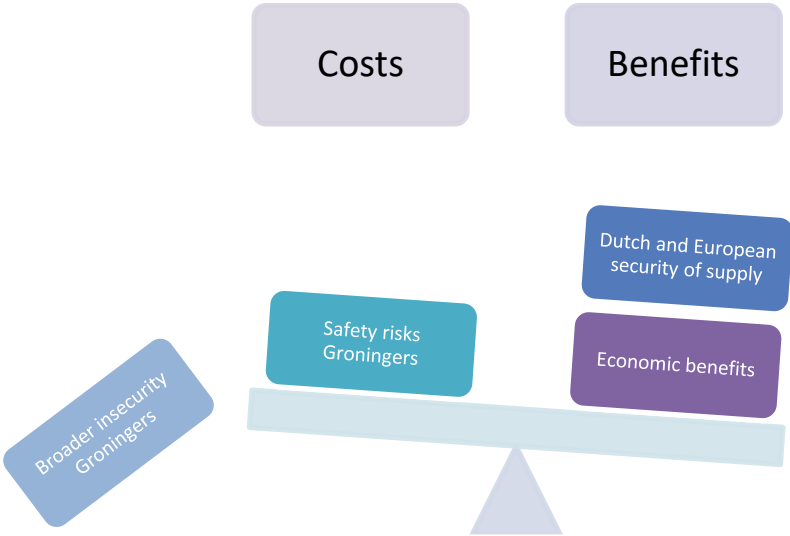


Figure 6: a cost-benefit model, weighing the conflicting interests against each other. The unquantifiable broader insecurity of Groningers is left out.

broader, more 'human-centred' picture, which exceeds the perspective of (physical) safety and is rather about a broader sense of security, including experiences and emotions (elaborated on in section 4.2). It appears that as these experiences and emotions are more difficult to quantify and therefore more difficult to incorporate in the cost-benefit analysis, they are threatened to be neglected and seen as 'merely the "externalized" costs of doing business' (Emel and Huber 2008: 1397). The left over quantifiable safety of Groningers, namely the calculated safety risks to Groningers, did apparently not outweigh the benefits of gas extraction: energy supply to Dutch and international households and industries, and economic profit. This might explain why gas extraction has been maintained for years, while Groninger feelings of insecurity intensified.

#### 4.2 Numbers versus experiences

*You will need practice people, people who just - this sounds very Gronings - stand with their feet in the clay. Like 'this is the problem and how will we tackle this'. You can calculate, but you'll also need to see and feel and think through. It looks like things aren't going well during the thinking through [part].*

- Tietsia Mekkering, a Groninger affected by gas extraction.

Above, Tietsia highlights a conflicting difference in thought of NAM employees and state actors on the one hand, and many affected Groningers on the other. The perceptions of these actors mainly contradict on issues of security and risk. While the NAM and state often employ a more technical and scientific approach, affected Groningers rather advocate a more 'holistic' and 'human-centred' approach. This last approach incorporates not only the quantitative aspects of security, but also those which are more difficult to express in numbers, like experiences and emotions.

Employees of the NAM appear to be aware of the differences in their perception of safety and those of affected Groningers. A letter of 17 January 2018 to the State Supervision of Mines (SodM) by the NAM illustrates this as it distinguishes between 'primary safety' or 'personal safety', and 'safety perception' [my emphasis].<sup>40</sup> While the letter does not elaborate on the exact definitions of these terms, it appears that 'personal safety' means the *calculated* safety risk 'tested against the safety norm as established by the committee Meijdam',<sup>41</sup> while 'safety perception' entails inhabitants' *feelings* of (un)safety (Schotman 2018b: 3). The 'personal safety' is assessed in a 'risk methodology', in which also is established to what (calculated) extent certain risks are acceptable. Along these lines, in an earlier letter to the SodM the NAM director

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<sup>40</sup> In a later letter, Minister of EAC Wiebes also distinguishes between 'security' and 'security perception' (Wiebes 2018: 3).

<sup>41</sup> A committee, appointed by the Minister of EA in 2015 to advise on how to deal with the risks of induced earthquakes.

Gerald Schotman states that the big earthquake at Zeerijp on 8 January 2018 falls ‘technically seen within the current risk modelling framework and in this way is not direct reason for adjustment of that framework’ (Schotman 2018a: 1). When I asked a NAM employee about increased seismicity around the village ‘t Zandt, he gave a similar answer that this fell ‘within the expected value’. So, if calculated risks become reality, like with the Zeerijp earthquake of 3.4 on the Richter Scale, they appear to be accepted by the NAM because earthquakes as big as this one had already been expected in their risk modelling framework. The NAM letter of 17 January is a response to the SodM’s decision to call out ‘code red’, which according to SodM means that ‘from the perspective of safety, it is expected that a production decrease is necessary’ (Staatstoezicht op de Mijnen 2018). The NAM argues that this is ‘incomprehensible’, and the code is ‘explicitly not meant as a safety norm, but as a framework in which is decided whether reasonable measures [...] can be executed at this level. If this is not possible, it does not mean that there is a safety risk’ (Schotman 2018b: 4-5). All in all, although the NAM has become aware of the safety perception of Groningers, it appears to neglect this when assessing safety risk. According to several scholars, this neglect of local safety perceptions is typical for neoliberal authorities, as these generally contradict their interests (e.g. Mercer *et al.* 2014; Willow and Wylie 2014). Melissa Checker argues that ‘perceptions of risk contrast sharply with official evaluations of risk’ (Checker 2007: 113). According to Checker, official risk assessment is shaped by biases and should incorporate local knowledge alongside scientific knowledge in order to develop ‘more accurate assessments of risk’ (ibid.: 113, 121).

I have observed in the NAM’s ‘risk methodology’ of 2015, its ‘extraction plan’ of 2016, and during an interview with a NAM employee, that the NAM does attempt to incorporate safety perception in its extraction plans and risk analyses. In the NAM’s risk methodology report, it says it aims to tackle the increased need to address ‘subjective safety’ by adopting an ‘integral and adaptive approach’ (Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij 2015: 3), instead of only expressing risks in ‘abstract numbers, figures and contours’ (ibid.: 12 ). Nevertheless, the NAM employee told me that, while he and his colleagues wanted to remove the insecurities of people and to address ‘experiences of risk perception’, ‘subjective safety, and ‘sense of security’, they were struggling with exactly how to do this. This was also clear from the report, which to me was still full of abstract numbers and figures and did not clearly express how it exactly attempted to make the report more ‘integral and adaptive’. Thus, while the NAM appeared to have become aware of the need to incorporate local experiences of security, it continued its conventional theoretical, technical and quantitative approach, and therefore failed to sufficiently incorporate ‘subjective’ perceptions of security.

The conflicting perspectives of NAM employees and state actors on the one hand, and affected Groningers on the other, partly seem to originate from geographical and emotional

distance. This comes forward in the differences between accounts of security on paper and the experiences of security in practice. On paper, policies often appear to be well calculated and substantiated by theories and models. However, according to GBB chairman Jelle, who also happens to be a sociological researcher, numbers appear to take out emotion and thus actual human experience. This can be illustrated with figure 7, showing the amount of damage compensation offers by the NAM that have been accepted by damage claimants (right column). While the 33.783 acceptations of the 42.346 NAM offers appear to be a relatively high percentage, these numbers do not show that some of these claimants have accepted the offers against their will, because they saw no other way (the story of the family Boukema in chapter 5.3 illustrates this).

Tabel 2: Overzicht van schadeafhandeling door de NAM (NAMplatform 1 november 2015)

	Schademelding	Aanbod	geaccepteerd
2012	2.485	383	247
2013	9.705	5.305	4.567
2014	18.044	11.149	10.569
2015	23.476	25.509	18.400
Totaal	53.710	42.346	33.783

Figure 7: amount of damage claims, NAM offers, and claimants acceptances between 2012 and 2015 (Royal Haskoning DHV 2015: 14).

As a result of such abstract numbers, perceptions of politicians and NAM employees sometimes diverge greatly from those of affected Groningers. Hans Luitens, preacher in an 'earthquake municipality', illustrates these differences in perception:

I have talked to people of the NAM [...]. I said: 'that was a disaster those first exchange houses'.<sup>42</sup> [...] [T]hese people lived on a construction site. They were not even finished, these exchange houses. But the NAM wasn't aware of this, they thought they had done well. [...] But these people become crazy of all these construction workers constantly walking back and forth and that this doesn't function and that doesn't function and that the room becomes wet because the bathroom is leaking etcetera etcetera. People become crazy of that! But if you are sitting behind your desk and you don't get in touch with these people, then you're not aware what these things on your desk mean to these people. [...] [H]ow people experience something like that, that's not on paper. There are only numbers on there.

<sup>42</sup> Exchange houses are the residences in which people temporarily stay when their houses are being reinforced.

The above occurred after the earthquake of Huizinge. According to Jakob, a former NAM employee, NAM employees and Groningers affected by gas extraction used to be in closer contact with each other before the Huizinge quake. Back then, the NAM organised ‘village rounds’ together with other Groninger organisations, in which the NAM and these organisations informed and answered questions of inhabitants of these villages. ‘I know from experience [...] that the best results can only be achieved when you’re *really* talking with people, [when you] see emotions, feel, smell’ [his emphasis], Jakob told me. Nevertheless, – to Jakob’s regret - after the earthquake of Huizinge, the scale of the problems had become so big that it was not possible to continue such personal gatherings. As a result, the distance between the NAM and Groningers increased and further broadened the gap between their perceptions of the situation in Groningen.

The different perceptions of security that NAM employees, but also state actors, have from people affected by gas extraction, might explain why neoliberal gas extraction-related policies are being maintained and why critiques on these have often not been taken seriously. It appears that the further away the decision makers, the more they talk about numbers, instead of the interests of individual people. The ‘National Coordinator Groningen’ Hans Alders illustrates this:

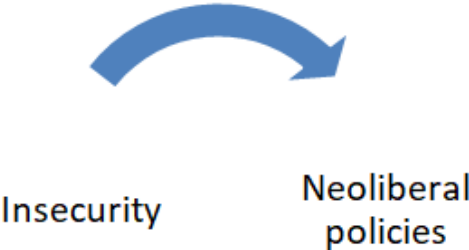
I saw a sentence in a text from the Cabinet: [...] ‘we are observing that speed [of housing reinforcement] and the individual conversation are in conflict with each other’. Well, such a text would not be written here [in Groningen]. Then what is being said is actually: ‘it doesn’t go fast enough, such a pity that so many people are involved’. [While] we are saying: eventually the pace should be determined by the people themselves. [my clarifications, his emphasis]

The physical and therefore emotional distance of policy makers in The Hague could provide part of the explanation for why the Dutch government has maintained Groninger gas extraction for such a long period after the earthquake in Huizinge. The numbers on paper (earthquakes of maximum 3.6 on the Richter Scale, no direct deaths or even other injuries) perhaps did not appear to be extreme, but to people the event developed grave sentiments that were not translatable into numbers.

## **Conclusion**

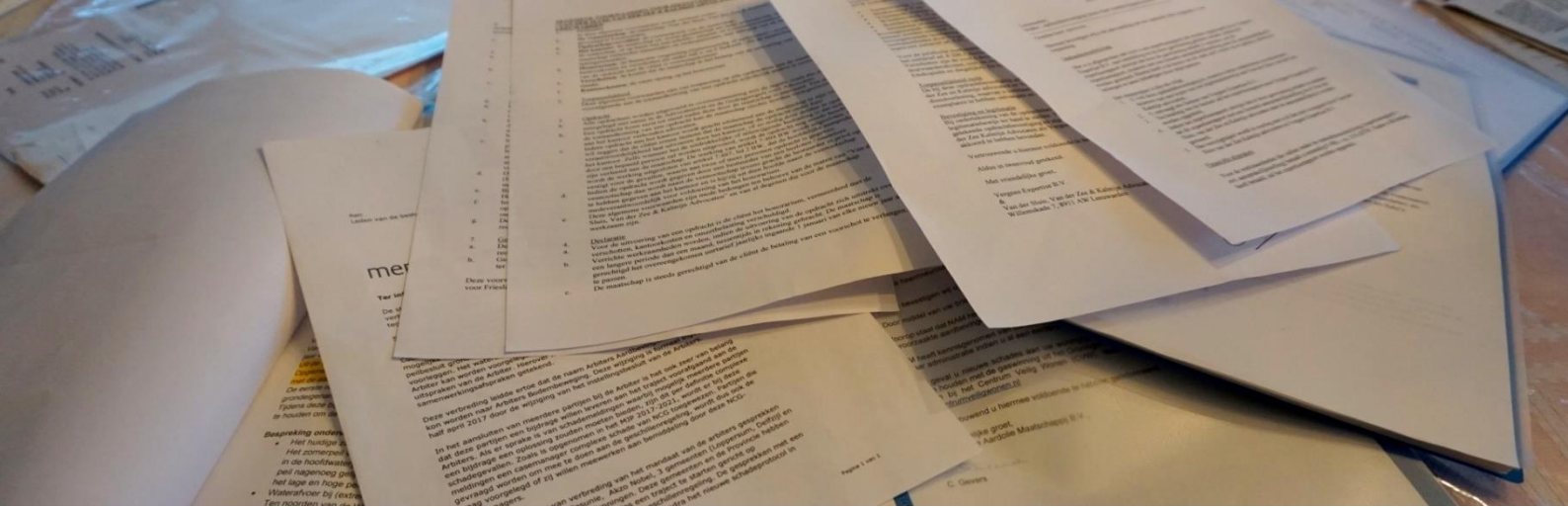
This chapter has illustrated why policies on Groninger gas extraction have diverged so much from the interests of affected Groningers. Conflicting interests and security perceptions between the NAM and the state on the one hand, and affected Groningers on the other, have resulted in

policies that prioritise the interests of the former (individualism and economic interests) and insufficiently address – and even further produce - sentiments of insecurity amongst the latter. The first two stages of the loop of insecurity begin to unfold, as illustrated in figure 8: insecurity, initially developed by the mining-induced earthquakes, is acted upon with neoliberal policies. In the following chapters, we will investigate how such policies are maintained and what their consequences are on feelings of insecurity.



*Figure 8: The first two stages of the loop of insecurity.*





*A pile of paper work of one damage claimant.*

## 5. Reinforcing Insecurity

In the preceding chapter, I have illustrated why neoliberal gas extraction policies diverge so much from the interests of Groningers, and therefore (further) produce insecurity. In the current chapter, I will demonstrate which strategies the NAM and the state adopt – or at least are believed to do so – in order to justify and support the execution of such policies. On the one hand, a ‘monopoly’ on knowledge is created and maintained, justifying the continuance of gas extraction and related policies. On the other hand, the state and the NAM are believed to employ divide and conquer and delaying strategies in order to make people non-resistant and in such a way ensure continued gas extraction. As a result, these strategies even reinforce feelings of insecurity.

### 5.1 The monopoly on knowledge

*Basically, this group of organisations and people [the ‘Gasberaad’] has an incredible amount of knowledge and experience to offer. People who in all areas really know how it works in practice. [This knowledge] is not being made use of! [my clarification and addition]*

- Susan Top, secretary of the ‘Gasberaad’, a collective of civil society organisations standing up for the interests of Groningers affected by gas extraction.

Many Groningers criticise the NAM and the state for approaching their practical problems in technical, legal and economic ways, largely neglecting the experiences and knowledge of the people who are affected by gas extraction. People told me that, for years, they have been asking for human-centred instead of technical approaches, for measures that take into account their personal needs and wishes. Instead, the NAM and the state appear to have established a ‘monopoly on knowledge’, developed by technical and legal (non-local) experts, which justifies their gas extraction policies and discards alternative (often local) knowledge.

Research commissioned by the NAM and the state appears to be utilised in such ways that it can justify their gas extraction policies. According to GBB chairman Jelle van der Knoop, former Minister of Economic Affairs Henk Kamp had set out fourteen studies after the earthquake of Huizinge and used the outcomes for his own interests: ‘people who want to defend something, those commission research and use what they want to use and leave out the rest’. After the publication of the studies, Minister Kamp seemed to suggest that gas extraction could be continued if different ‘production scenario’s and extraction techniques’ were used and if houses would be reinforced (Kamp 2014: 3,5). Another research, often critically referred to by Groningers, was executed by engineering and consulting agency Witteveen+Bos, and commissioned by the NAM. This research concluded that damage in the ‘outside area’ (outside the ‘contour’ of the ‘damage processing area’, as established in previous research, see figure 9) could not be related to mining activities (Witteveen+Bos 2017). According to the mayor of a so-called ‘earthquake municipality’, the research itself did not conclude that there was no relation at all between gas extraction and the damage outside of these contour lines, it just could not point out there was a direct causal relation between the two factors. ‘However, the outcome is translated by the NAM as: so there is no damage caused by the gas extractions. That’s a totally different one’, the mayor told me. The NAM used this research to justify that it would not compensate damage outside of these contour lines. Nevertheless, there was a lot of damage

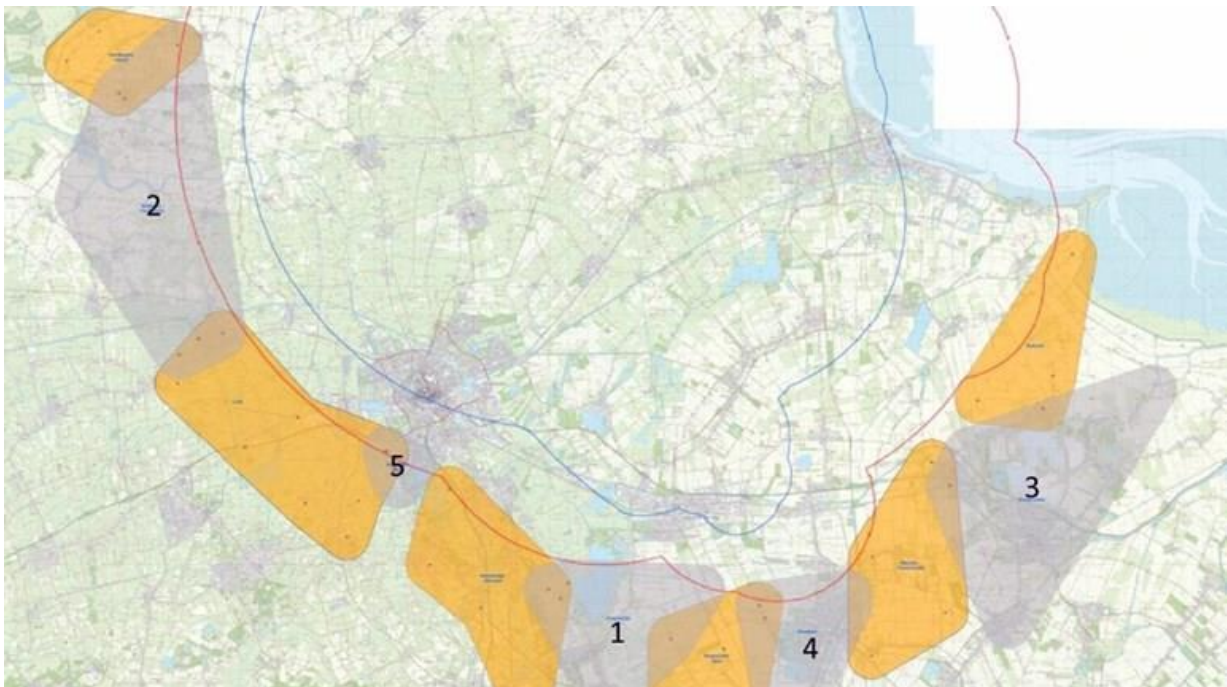


Figure 9: The so-called contour map, created by consultancy firm Arcadis in a study commissioned by NAM. Damage outside of the red line can, according to the NAM, not be related to gas extraction.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.rtvnoord.nl/nieuws/176160/Massale-afwijzing-claims-buiten-contourlijn-compensatieregeling-op-komst>, the original source (Arcadis/NAM) cannot be found.

outside of these contour lines, which had often developed after bigger earthquakes in the area. The contour lines created arbitrary situations: sometimes for one household the damage would be compensated, while a hundred meters further, damage compensation would be declined. During a court case in which a foundation called WAG<sup>44</sup> and residential corporations sued the NAM for decreasing Groninger house prices, the chair of the WAG declared:

The contour lines are too academic for me. The location of the house is more important. If your house is located next to water, it's different from when that's not the case. The theoretical approach sometimes deviates from practical experiences.<sup>45</sup>

This statement further illustrates the gap between theoretical knowledge and local, practical knowledge - or as James Scott (1998) would call it, *techne* versus *metis*. While theoretical knowledge is developed to justify policies beneficial to the the NAM and the state, practical knowledge is not or barely incorporated in such theoretical models. Alternative research which does consider such local knowledge is being obstructed, silenced, or cannot be executed at all due to insufficient resources. In a Radio 1 interview, independent geologist Peter van der Gaag argued that most research has been commissioned by the NAM, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and related parties. These organisations paid about 'tens or hundreds of millions' for research, while parties opposing Groninger gas extraction, like the GBB, paid only about 'ten thousand euros' for research in the Groninger soil (Groeneveld 2016). Also, 'the KNMI<sup>46</sup> and the NAM had the [relevant] data, did nothing with it and refused to give the data to independent geologists' [my clarification], Van der Gaag said in a newspaper interview (Van der Velden 2015). In the past, other independent scientists have attempted to voice alternative perspectives, but these have been declared 'lunatics' by the NAM and have not been taken seriously for decades (see chapter 3). As a result, the NAM and the state have acquired a certain knowledge monopoly in the field of Groninger gas extraction. According to independent geologist Manuel Sintubin, alternative research has been shunned (by the state). 'It could be that results will appear which people don't want to know' (Braam 2017). By carefully selecting certain experts and omitting opposing, critical voices - which happens more often in neoliberal decision making (e.g. Finewood and Stroup 2012; Hudgins and Poole 2014; Mercer *et al.* 2014; Willow and Wylie 2014) - the ones in power justify their policies, while opposing parties and their knowledge are further being marginalised.

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<sup>44</sup> Acronym for: 'Waardedaling Aardbevingen Groningen', or 'Value Decrease Earthquakes Groningen'. The foundation supports Groningers with decreased housing value due to the mining-induced earthquakes.

<sup>45</sup> Paraphrased, as I was not able to record the court hearing.

<sup>46</sup> 'Koninklijk Nederlands Meteorologisch Instituut', or the 'Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute'

## 5.2 Divide and conquer

*A Captain ought, among all the other actions of his, endeavor with every art to divide the forces of the enemy, either by making him suspicious of his men in whom he trusted, or by giving him cause that he has to separate his forces, and, because of this, become weaker.*

- Niccolò Machiavelli (1520: 74).

'Divide and conquer', as described above by political philosopher Machiavelli, is according to many Groningers another strategy the NAM and the state employ to maintain their gas extraction policies.<sup>47</sup> The Groningers believe the NAM and the state deliberately divide individuals and groups, by treating them differently and by financially supporting organisations which otherwise would have been able to voice strong criticisms on gas extraction policies. This division amongst the Groningers withholds them from (effectively) resisting gas extraction-related policies.

Several people told me that there is a big division between homeowners with small damages and those with bigger damage. Small damages are dealt with quickly and are compensated generously. Only when the costs of repairing damage reach a certain level, the damage claim process becomes much more complex and tiresome. Kees, owner of a heavily damaged house, told me about the NAM's change in attitude when his damage turned out to be more than just a couple of cracks in the wall:

The first damage I reported, [...] that was about a small amount, that was quickly settled. [...] Altogether that was an amount of about 8000 euros or something like that. [...] But in the meantime, the earthquakes continued. [...] Then came the 8 centimetres slant [...], and well then the squabbling begins, because then it's about serious money. Then you're not finished with five thousand euros, no, that is serious damage that is caused. And then you're talking about ten thousand euros, or perhaps hundred thousand euros. And well, then the NAM closes its wallet and turns on the blue flashing lights.

From the moment the NAM realised Kees' house had substantial damage, his damage claim process began to be very lengthy and tiresome. He had to turn to multiple authorities and even the judge before real solutions were sought for his heavily damaged home. Kees' example illustrates what many people with bigger damage experience: often their case starts with some small damages. The NAM then usually responds relatively quickly and repairs most of these damages. Later, or already during the first inspection, inspectors or the people themselves find

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<sup>47</sup> While I have highlighted the NAM's divide and conquer techniques here, the state is also believed to have employed this strategy. For instance, Second Chamber member Sandra Beckerman told me Minister Wiebes deliberately did not include old damages (those who fell under the old damage protocol) in the new protocol in order to create division between 'old' and 'new' claimants (see 'epilogue').

out that that the damage is bigger than expected. Then it often becomes a fight between the homeowner and the NAM or the affiliated CVW about the cause of the damage and the size of the compensation. It usually depends on the capability of homeowners to stand up for themselves to what extent they are successful in claiming compensation and/or a satisfactory reinforcement of their homes.

In the meantime, smaller damages are often compensated quickly and relatively generously. On top of that, when the costs of damage restoration are higher than 1000 euros, which most are, people receive a 4000 euros subsidy to make their homes energy-sufficient, which they can spend on for example solar panels or a heat pump. The reaction of a man with 2000 euros damage is telling for that of many people with small damage: 'I thought that was very nice of these people. [...] [W]e have accepted that gratefully'. Because of the difference in treatment between people with small and bigger damages, the former group does not always understand how the latter group feels. One woman with a heavily damaged house told me: 'then you'll get [the reaction]: "yes, but the NAM solves it quickly and decently, right? Then what are you complaining about?"'. As the majority of the people only have small damages – one of my interlocutors believed this was about ninety percent - they often do not grasp how people with bigger damages feel treated and sometimes even believe these people are profiteers. In turn, the people with bigger damages feel misunderstood and let down and sometimes even start to isolate themselves and their problems.

While the damage claim processes cause tensions between people with small and big damages, the reinforcement of houses causes tensions between direct neighbours. The neighbourhood Opwierde-Zuid is a clear example of this. Opwierde-Zuid is one of the first neighbourhoods in the earthquake area in which reinforcement has been planned collectively and some reinforcements have already been executed. I met one of the residents of Opwierde-Zuid on a cold December night during an action event. Here, blankets knitted by people all over the country were handed out to people who were living in temporary houses while their own houses were being reinforced. One man, Aart, told me he was resisting the reinforcement plans for his street, together with some other neighbours. In an interview with him a week later, Aart told me that tensions were running high between several neighbours. First of all, there were tensions between neighbours who received different treatments. One type of houses, so-called 'stone facade houses' was being demolished, rebuilt and would be connected to electricity, instead of gas. The type of house Aart owned, a 'curtain wall house', would only be reinforced, and in a way which Aart did not believe to be safe. Because of that, Aart was afraid that his house and the other curtain wall houses would decline in value in relation to the stone facade houses on the other side of the street. The owners of curtain wall houses were also treated differently, as the reinforcement operation was bigger for people living in the corner houses. Because of



*Figure 10: A house that is being reinforced in Opwierde-Zuid.*

that, better offers (financially as well as more improvements to their houses) were made to people living in those houses, while people living in the other houses, received less. This resulted in tensions between neighbours:

[F]ear lives amongst people. Look, my neighbour here in the second home next to that corner house, he did not attend the residential block meeting [...] with the NCG [...]. He [did not agree with the plans and] said: 'screw them'. And then you see that the neighbours around him say: 'For God's sake, then [my house] also won't be reinforced. [T]hen we'll have to bully him away'. [...] So you see that it is very much about the 'relational' in the neighbourhood. 'You are a screamer because you don't want to reinforce', and 'you are stupid because you cooperate'. [my clarifications]

This is what people often mean with the 'divide and conquer' strategy of the NAM; by treating people differently and by playing them against each other, people focus on each other, instead of contesting the plans most of them do not really agree with. According to Willow and Wylie (2014), this is a common technique amongst energy extraction companies, as studies have demonstrated the use of such divide and conquer strategies by oil extraction companies in Ecuador (Sawyer 2004) as well as by fracking companies in the United States (Willow and Wylie 2014: 227).

Next to dividing people by treating individuals differently, many of my research participants told me the NAM and the state divide influential organisations from individuals through financial means. By subsidising and sponsoring local organisations, clubs, and

initiatives, the NAM (sometimes indirectly via 'Centrum Veilig Wonen') and the state make them more or less dependent on such financial support or at least withhold them from expressing criticism. Kees illustrates this with some personal experiences:

I started with an action [...], I thought it would be nice to hang posters on windows in the street, so [the action] would be supported well. [...] Across the street lives a man and he has a snack bar slash catering company. He says: 'I totally agree with you, I totally agree with you. But well, I am catering five times a week at the 'Centrum Veilig Wonen',<sup>48</sup> if I'll hang that poster, I'll lose that business'. So I went to the garage next door, same story: 'I totally agree, what's happening here is unjust, but the cars of Centrum Veilig Wonen are parked here for maintenance. If I'll hang that poster, I'll lose that business! [...] And the same for the estate agent and like that, a couple more. They are everywhere, they are everywhere. [...] Between neighbours something arises like: why you and not me. Jealousy. [...] The divide and conquer is everywhere.

Next to individual entrepreneurs, according to Kees especially bigger organisations and business profit from the NAM's subsidies and sponsorships:

Recently, we had a music spectacle in Delfzijl sponsored by, yes, the NAM. Last year the sports field near Loppersum, they received a panna field, the kids. Great, sponsored by [pause so I could fill in: 'the NAM']. [...] The most poignant example was, the cultural council of Middelstum organised an art route last year, from Oosterwiltwerd to Westerwiltwerd. Everything in old churches, farms and mills, and beautiful buildings. All piece by piece buildings that are heavily threatened in terms of mining damage. [...] I began to talk with the farmer [who owned the farm]. [...] [T]he heavy quake of Huizinge in 2012, 3.6, made a huge mess of that farm. His family under pressure, his wife did not want to be there anymore, yada yada yada. And who sponsored this art route? The NAM. [...] With these stories I want to illustrate how far the NAM is entangled [with local society]. What they are doing is: schools, companies, the 'Forum'<sup>49</sup> in the city Groningen are being safeguarded, but when it's about individuals, then the shutters will close. [my clarifications]

This subsidisation by the NAM is paradoxical as it appears to serve the purpose of strengthening and supporting Groninger communities, but in fact creates divisions between them. Tensions have developed *between* affected individuals and organisations, obstructing them from uniting *against* the policies and practices which negatively affect them. This division amongst affected actors provides (part of) the explanation for why many of them have not resisted gas extraction. After all, 'it is easier to kick sideways than upwards', many people told me.

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<sup>48</sup> While the CVW was set-up to operate at a distance from the NAM, it was reported to be strictly controlled by the NAM (De Boer 2017).

<sup>49</sup> The 'Groninger Forum' is an organisation for cultural facilities and activities. It will open a new, tall building on the 'Grote Markt' in 2019, to which the NAM has contributed 68 million euros to make it 'earthquake resistant' (*De Telegraaf* 2015).

The caveat must be made here that it is not clear whether this 'divide and conquer' is an actually deliberated strategy by the NAM and the state, or whether they have merely been *experienced* as such. It is always difficult to prove - and it is debatable whether it is necessary here - that an 'evil mastermind' has deliberately set-out this plan of divide and conquer. We can nevertheless observe that, deliberately or not, certain policies and practises by the NAM and the state have had divisionary effects.

### 5.3 Delay

*But they still filed an appeal! Only delay, delay, delay. Because as long as you'll appeal, or as long as you'll maintain a lawsuit, they can just continue with gas extraction.*

- Pieta, affected resident and resister.

Like Pieta, many of the Groningers and also non-Groninger experts have told me the NAM and the state implemented a strategy of delay in order to continue extracting gas and/or to obstruct resistance against gas extraction-related policies.

A telling example of a delaying process is that of the Boukema family. Menno and Martje Boukema are retired farmers of in their seventies, who live in a 70 year old farm in the centre of the earthquake region. When I interviewed them in October 2017, they were still emotionally recovering from a disappointing arbitration process less than a month ago. This family had a lot of damage to their farm which had been in a very good condition before the earthquakes started occurring. In 2015 they reported the damage that had developed in 2014/2015. In 2016 an expert from the NAM came to investigate this damage. He reported that all damage was so-called 'C-damage', which meant that the damage was not related to mining-induced earthquakes. The family Boukema did not leave it at that and made use of their right for contra-expertise. This expert turned almost all of these damages into 'B-damage', meaning that part of the damage is related to mining-induced earthquakes. The NAM did not agree with this claim and hired a third expert, which again agreed with the first expert that no damage was related to earthquakes. Menno:

From that moment on it also became emotional for us. That man came here at the start of December, so that is almost a year ago, he came here and said: 'Well sir, in Brabant<sup>50</sup> there are also houses with a small crack [...], sheds with a small crack'. In other words, what do you want? So at that moment, you're not taken seriously.

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<sup>50</sup> Province to the south of the Netherlands, approximately 250 kilometres from Groningen.



The family Boukema felt harassed, not only by the expert from Brabant, but also by other NAM and CVW employees, in person as well as on paper - as they believed the biggest damages were deliberately kept out of the instructions for the inspector. They thought this was done on purpose – apart from saving costs - in order to make them tired and ‘non-resistant’. Again, the family Boukema did not leave it at this and went to the arbitrator.<sup>51</sup> It took eight months before their case was being processed. Martje: ‘It is as if it is happening on purpose. It lasts and lasts’. Shortly before the arbitration, the frustration of the Boukema family continued to build up when they received a letter (‘bearing note’<sup>52</sup>) by the CVW in which the standpoint of the NAM (which was mainly that no damage was directly caused by earthquakes) was explained. Menno got pain in his stomach when he read the letter:

[I]n there you are portrayed as suspect, as it were. It is just like you are being accused of having the *miserable* courage to even *dare* suggesting that an earthquake was the cause of your weak shed [...] [Y]ou are already being destroyed when you receive that letter. Then you think: we don’t even have to go, because it is already finished. We don’t have anything to say. [...] Nothing is earthquake damage. [his emphasis]

After the third NAM expert, the family Boukema had asked an acquainted roofer to check the claim of the third expert that their roof was too heavy for the construction of their shed, and had therefore caused damage. This roofer argued that this claim was incorrect, which the family forwarded in a letter to the CVW. In the bearing note, the CVW according to the couple implied that this man was biased. Menno: ‘that distrust is there, [...] that’s very annoying. In everything you are being “put in the corner like a little boy”’.<sup>53</sup>

When the day of the arbitration had finally arrived, Menno and Martje felt like they were not being heard by the arbitrator. The first expert from the NAM took the lead when the arbitrator was shown the damages and nothing was asked to the family Boukema. The Boukema’s corrected the ‘pertinent falsehoods’ which the third expert told the arbitrator, but were ignored. At the end of the arbitration, there was a hearing. After a while, Menno, Martje, and their contra-expert had to leave the room so the NAM experts and representative could discuss their offer. After a while they were asked to enter the room again and a settlement was proposed: the NAM offered a compensation that was higher than the earlier offer, but still not enough to sufficiently repair all damage. The couple felt intimidated by the behaviour of the NAM experts, of which one often looked at them with a grin, showing an attitude like: ‘what do you want?’, making jokes about the ‘crooked walls’ and ‘rusted roof bolts’. Menno:

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<sup>51</sup> The arbitrator aims to solve damage claim conflicts between the NAM and damage claimants.

<sup>52</sup> In Dutch: ‘oplegnotitie’.

<sup>53</sup> Dutch saying: ‘In de hoek gezet als een kleine jongen’.

[T]hey are pressuring you like ‘just sign, because otherwise you’ll have to go to court’. [...] And if you know how much that costs, I don’t have the money for that. There are people who have done that, that will cost between 60.000 and 80.000 euros, Annemarie Heite<sup>54</sup> calculated for us. You will have to have that kind of money. And even then it’s still not sure whether you will win from the lawyers of Shell. [...] We signed because at that moment we were totally fed up with it. [...] And [it takes] a lot of patience, because that takes *years*. And do you know what? We want to be done with it, because you’re fed up with it. [...] And I think that’s what perhaps the most important, because *please*, I just want to put the whole thing behind me. [his emphases]

The story of the family Boukema illustrates the endurance (this process took about 2,5 years) *and* financial means people should have to claim their damage. Menno and Martje are not the only ones who believe that the NAM, and other actors like the state, deliberately try to delay processes and humiliate people in order to make them tired and therefore ‘non-resistant’. Many people I have spoken to have similar experiences or know people with comparable stories. This strategy of delay does not end when people actually take the financial and emotional hurdle to go to court. A well-known story in Groningen is that of Hiltje Zwarberg, a Groninger who could not celebrate Christmas at home four years in a row due to his lengthy conflict with the NAM. Between 2013 and start 2018, Hiltje contested the NAM and their claim that the 223.000 euros damage to his house was not related to gas extraction. During these years, the NAM responded to Hiltje’s complaints and lawsuits with lengthy home inspections, soil researches, settlement offers, and eventually by stalling compensation and threatening to appeal when Zwarberg won his court case (Miskovic 2018a) (“Aardbevingsslachtoffer viert Kerst” 2017). Nevertheless, two weeks after this announcement the NAM informed that it eventually would not appeal as ‘although there are legal reasons to appeal, we prefer to solve this long-lasting case quickly’ (“NAM gaat niet” 2018).

Zwarberg’s story illustrates the perseverance Groningers need to claim their right and how far the NAM is willing to go to prevent precedent. Many Groningers are not capable, financially, mentally and/or do not believe they have the skills, to follow Zwarberg’s example. Therefore, like the family Boukema, many affected Groningers accept the NAM’s offers or are not able to fight the NAM as strongly as Hiltje did. According to many of my research participants, the delaying techniques by the NAM are directed at achieving exactly this effect: making people tired and ‘non-resistant’, therefore enabling the NAM to continue extracting gas.

As argued in the previous chapter, the state was also interested in continuing gas extraction. Many people told me the government adopted similar delaying techniques. Some refer to the response by the previous Minister of Economic Affairs Henk Kamp to the Huizinge earthquake of 2012: instead of directly implementing measures, the Minister first set out

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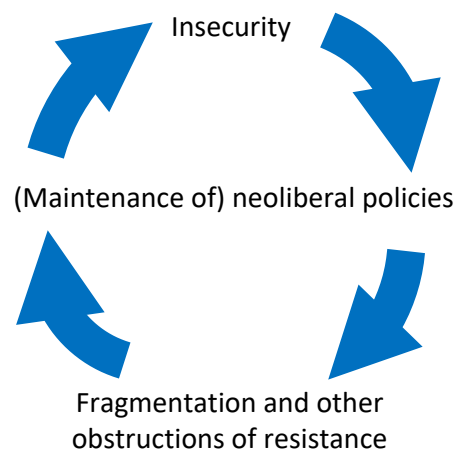
<sup>54</sup> Famous Groninger anti-gas extraction activist.

fourteen studies. GBB chairman Jelle van der Knoop: 'Partly because he wanted to know more, I believe that, but also partly to delay the matter'. It took more than a year before the resulting research reports were published (Start and Ekker 2018). In the same year, more than 53 billion cubic meters of gas was extracted, which was approximately 6 billion 'cube' more than the previous year (Buro Bontenbal 2015: 2). According to previous GBB chair Hilda Groeneveld in the GBB newspaper of October:

Research means buying time. Reinforcement [of houses] and lawyers do the rest: time-consuming procedures. Everything to excavate the gas underneath Groningen. That's the goal. At any cost. (Groninger Bodem Beweging 2017: 19, my clarification)

### Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated which strategies and techniques are (believed to intentionally be) deployed by the NAM and the state in order to continue the extraction of gas. While a monopoly on knowledge supports the state and NAM's gas extraction-related policies, divide and conquer and delaying techniques obstruct resistance against such policies. As a result the loop of insecurity is completed and even reinforced, as illustrated in figure 11. The next chapter will further bring to light how the neoliberal gas extraction policies obstruct resistance and rather lead to coping mechanisms of 'acquiescence'.



*Figure 11: The loop of insecurity.*





*A Groninger church surrounded by tough, Groninger clay.*

## **6. Acquiescence: Groninger Folk Nature or Coping Mechanism?**

Before I started my fieldwork, comedian Freek de Jonge had started a petition to attract attention to the problems of Groningers affected by gas extraction. To his disappointment, just before De Jonge wanted to hand over the petition to the Prime Minister, only about six per cent of the Groningers had signed the petition (Bootsma 2017). This is exemplary for the mood in Groningen before and during my fieldwork: many people wondered why not that many Groningers appeared to resist. Most of my research participants told me it was the tough ‘Groninger folk nature’ due to which many Groningers accept the stressful situations they find themselves in. Nevertheless, this chapter hopes to dig beyond this explanation. I will argue that people have not only become ‘non-resistant’ because of the Groninger folk nature, but also become of a general sense of disempowerment, created by an experienced lack of financial, human, and political capital,<sup>55</sup> and tiredness because of lengthy damage claim and reinforcement processes. Affected Groningers have adopted coping mechanisms of ‘acquiescence’ in order to maintain a sense of security. Two forms of acquiescence, or ‘reluctant acceptance’ (“Acquiescence” n.d.), help maintain a sense of control over one’s life. This sometimes even brings the strength to continue resistance, yet often on a lower level.

### **6.1 The Groninger folk nature**

*We are Groningers too. And if you know Groningers: we do not want to stand out from the crowd. We are known as level-headed people. Of course we aren’t, but we are introverts. And then you don’t show your emotions and also not your problems. Because that’s nobody’s business. In general, the Groningers are like that. [...] The people from the West, [...] they’re opening their mouth. [...] We are not really like that. We are somewhat modest. Like: ‘it is annoying, but it just is like that’. That’s*

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<sup>55</sup> By ‘human capital’, I mean (acquired) skills, knowledge and experience (e.g. Becker 1964; Smith 1776), with ‘political capital’ I mean political representation and support.

*perhaps in the nature of the Groningers, that they accept things with resignation. And that he or she mainly keeps it for him- or herself. And that we are talking to you is already non-Gronings.*

- Menno Boukema, Groninger affected by gas extraction.

One question that I asked almost everyone during my fieldwork was: ‘why do not that many Groningers appear to resist?’. Most people; Groningers *and* people originally from somewhere else, answered: because of the Groninger folk nature.<sup>56</sup> As already described by Menno above, most people described Groningers as: adaptive (they do not want to stand out), level-headed, introverted,<sup>57</sup> silent, modest, accepting, tough, self-reliant and law-abiding<sup>58</sup>. Many of my research participants told me that Groningers deal with setbacks by ‘shrugging their shoulders’ and keeping going. They are not used to opening their mouths and questioning authority, at least not in public. Their Groninger dialect also is ‘shorter and more direct’, Menno told me. People explained to me that because of these reasons, Groningers are not very likely to resist and first try to solve their problems by themselves, in a ‘decent manner’.

Peter Pile, an Amsterdammer who moved to Groningen eighteen years ago, told me, as well as others, that the Groninger folk nature has been developed historically. According to Peter:

Here in Groningen, you had four categories of people: the extremely wealthy nobility, the extremely wealthy church, and extremely wealthy farmers, and underneath that you only had the common folk.<sup>59</sup> And these were dirt poor. A middle class doesn’t exist here. [...] So here, we have the common folk and the rich. That has become the folk nature. People are used to being subjugated. They have had everything rammed down their throats. And they have learned to live with that and shrug their shoulders again. ‘If we have food on the table tomorrow, then we’ll see. And further we don’t worry, because it does not help anyways’.

Peter told me a middle class eventually did develop in Groningen, however, this group has mostly come from outside of Groningen, the so-called ‘import’.<sup>60</sup> While describing the Groninger folk nature, many people contrast this to the attitudes and behaviour of such ‘import’ or ‘Westerners’, like Menno. ‘Import’ refers to people from outside of Groningen, which can also refer to neighbouring provinces Friesland and Drenthe, and to provinces to the south of the Netherlands. ‘Westerners’ are mainly seen as people from the ‘Randstad’, which is the highly populated region to the West of the Netherlands, mainly consisting of the provinces Zuid-

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<sup>56</sup> In Dutch: ‘volksaard’.

<sup>57</sup> In Dutch: ‘opkroppers’, which means that problems are ‘being stacked up’ inside, and has the chance to erupt if too much has been stacked up.

<sup>58</sup> In Dutch: ‘autoriteitsgevoelig’.

<sup>59</sup> In Dutch: ‘klootjesvolk’.

<sup>60</sup> In Dutch they also call it ‘de import’, which grammatically sounds funny, but is a common term in Groningen.

Holland, Noord-Holland, and Utrecht. Especially people from 'the West' are often described - by Groningers as well as 'Westerners' themselves - as outspoken people who are not reluctant to defy authority if necessary; thus, the opposite of Groningers. 'I can open my mouth', several people who were originally from cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam told me proudly. Because of this, many 'import' people are said to lead the resistance movements against Groninger gas extraction; for instance, Annemarie Heite, who was filmed for a documentary about the earthquakes and is one of the leading spokespersons about gas extraction in the media, and many board members of the GBB, like former spokesperson Dick Kleijer, current spokesperson Derwin Schorren, and chairman Jelle van der Knoop. Also the majority of the 'collective resisters' I have spoken, mostly GBB members, are originally not from Groningen.

Nevertheless, quite some other well-known resisters against the gas extraction *are* 'real' Groningers: for example John Lanting, founder of radical action group 'Schokkend Groningen', Hiltje Zwarberg, the well-known man who was in a lengthy legal fight with the NAM, and farmer Sijbrand Nijhoff, who claimed he was in possession of the secret gas deal between the state, the NAM, Shell and ExxonMobil of 1963 (as discussed in the 'epilogue' of this thesis). Even though these people and their actions still often were not framed as 'Gronings' by my participants - Peter Pile said that Zwarberg had become 'Un-Gronings' because of his military training and the Boukema's said that Nijhoff went public because 'he had no choice' - the fact that these people *did* publically resist gas extraction and its consequences means that the Groninger folk nature argument is not a complete explanation for the apparent lack of resistance in Groningen.

Peter Kodde, 'professional activist' at environmental organisation 'Milieudefensie' in Amsterdam, does not believe there is such a thing as a Groninger folk nature. According to him, the idea merely has a 'self-reinforcing' effect: people accept their fate and do not resist. He experienced something similar when he coordinated action against the 'Betuwelijn', a railway connection through 'de Betuwe', in the central-east of the Netherlands, and also during protests against a NATO base in Limburg, in the south of the Netherlands. 'There people at first also said they were law abiding and such. [...] Nevertheless, if you give them the means to resist, people do certainly resist'. Peter believes that people are rather adopting the folk nature argument out of disempowerment, as an excuse not to resist. 'It is a form of psychological self-protection'. Indeed, many Groningers told me they felt powerless. The following paragraphs will investigate to what extent such disempowerment relates to non-resistance and acquiescence.

## 6.2 Disempowerment



Translation:

### *Rest in peace Groningen*

*Unfortunately there were not enough Groningers who committed themselves to fighting against the gas mafia to preserve Groningen. The gas extraction war was long and violent.*

*When 99.9% of the Groningers realised about amongst others the deception, trickery and suppression, it was too late. The disaster had already taken place. At the end many of the Resistance were fatigued and defeated.*

Figure 12: Post on the Facebook page of action group 'Schokkend Groningen'.<sup>61</sup>

The above picture, posted on the Facebook page of action group 'Schokkend Groningen', illustrates the disempowerment many Groningers affected by gas extraction ('real Groningers' and 'import', resisters and non-resisters) experience. The text on the gravestone states that many resisters have been 'fatigued' and 'defeated' by the 'deception, trickery and suppression' of the 'gas mafia'. I have indeed met many people who have stopped their resistance because of such tiredness, or people who did not start resisting in the first place, because they did not feel powerful enough financially, skills-wise and politically.

The financial power disparity between the NAM and the state on the one hand, and Groningers affected by gas extraction on the other, is clearly visible during legal issues. As Menno already said: it costs people a lot of money to go to court to fight the NAM and/or state. This already withholds many people from resisting legally, as they simply do not have the money to do this. When people do take the hurdle to go to court, they face another obstacle: the NAM has the financial means to hire the best (and thus most expensive) lawyers. Klaas Bulder, owner of a heavily damaged house, told me, when talking about Hiltje Zwarberg's case: 'I am very surprised that they hired 'de Brauw Blackstone'. That's located on the 'Zuidas'.<sup>62</sup> That's a law

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/schokkend.grunn/> .

<sup>62</sup> The business district of Amsterdam.



firm that already charged 300 guilders<sup>63</sup> per hour forty years ago'. These lawyers are not only the most expensive ones, they are also big in number: when I attended the 'WAG court case' about housing value decrease, it was clear to me that the NAM had a bigger legal representation than the prosecuting twelve housing corporations and the WAG foundation, which represented 4000 Groninger households. While the latter two parties both had two lawyers, the NAM – formally also represented by two lawyers - had brought many more (wo)men in suits who were clearly there to assist the two main lawyers. My key interlocutors Martin and Pieta, who have attended several court cases against the NAM, confirmed this and told me that also in the court case preceding this appeal there were only two lawyers from the WAG foundation, and two of the housing corporations, while 'the whole room was full of NAM lawyers'. Demonstrating the amount of lawyers, Martin and Pieta amusingly told me that when one of the main lawyers' laptop broke, they passed the laptop to one employee after the other sitting behind them, until somebody in the back was finally able to fix the problem.

Feelings of financial disempowerment are not exclusively related to legal costs, but also other, often overlooked costs. Rianne Verspuij, who owns a heavily damaged residential farm, told me that, although she wanted to, she did not have the time to actively volunteer for the GBB. As she was a freelancer, all the time she spent on resistance, could not be spent on her own work. In that way, resisting would actually lead to income loss. I have met many others who faced similar dilemmas. There are also financial consequences when people individually resist insufficient damage claim offers by the NAM. Every time someone hires a contra-expert to reassess the damage, or when people go to the arbitrator to challenge the NAM, they will have to take hours or days off of work. These inspections often do not occur once or twice, but a multiplication of that. Menno and Martje Boukema told me that Martje's cousin was visited by *eighteen* inspectors. The financial costs of resisting in the ways as described above, discourage people from spending their valued time on such forms of resistance.

Next to feeling powerless financially, some Groningers do not find themselves capable enough skills-wise to effectively resist gas extraction and its consequences. The GBB chairman Jelle told me that much of their work entails reading many complex (policy) pieces, writing own proposals, letters, articles and other documents, and lobbying. Also presentation and discussion skills are required when attending meetings with stakeholders, and presenting standpoints in front of diverse audiences and the media. Jelle believed a higher education background is necessary to effectively resist in this way: 'if it had been a different form of resistance, where you'll have to take the streets, then it would be different'. But Jelle does not believe public protesting is effective in the case of Groningen. People in Groningen also do not seem to be

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<sup>63</sup> Dutch currency before 2002. Nowadays, 300 guilders would be about 135 euros (converted with <http://www.liesbos.nl/algemeen/euroconv.htm>).

tempted to do this in great numbers, except for the last two torchlight processions. The case of Menno and Martje appears to support these statements. They both did not feel like taking the streets – ‘we [Groningers] are not the kind of people who are directly going to stand by the road with signs’ [my clarification] – and they neither believed they had the necessary skills to express their arguments clearly and to resist: ‘we are not educated to defend ourselves well, are we?’. In this way, people either accept offers which are against their own interest, like Menno and Martje did, or search for help at professional organisations, like legal counsel, housing unions, and services that interest groups like the GBB and ‘Gasberaad’ are offering. Nevertheless, the latter are overloaded with work and often are not able to help people in the short term. As certain skills, acquired through higher education, are necessary to effectively resist gas extraction-related policies, class differences are being exacerbated. As a consequence, ‘lower’ educated people feel like their resistance would not be effective anyways, and leave this to their ‘higher’ educated ‘representatives’ (sometimes leading to marginalisation and misrepresentation, see chapter 7.2).

Apart from feeling powerless financially and skills-wise, many people I have spoken to feel disempowered on a political level. According to them, political power is located outside of Groningen; in Assen, where the NAM is located, and in The Hague, where the Dutch government resides. Rianne Verspuij, a Rotterdammer by origin who now lives on the Groninger countryside, told me about the feelings of powerlessness amongst people in the ‘periphery’ (‘non-urbanised’ areas), in contrast to the centrality of inhabitants in the urbanised area of the Netherlands. Here, she referred to an essay by the Dutch ‘Chief Government Architect’<sup>64</sup> Floris Alkemade, who reported that the unequal attention to the centres ‘creates a systematic underestimation of and a lack of engagement with the peripheral areas’ (Alkemade 2016: 9).

Most of my Groninger research participants indeed experienced such an unequal (political) attention to the ‘Randstad’, the Dutch urbanised area to the West, and a lack of concern for their region, which is far away from The Hague. Tjipko, a ‘real Groninger’, told me he did not feel inclined to resist because ‘you can be as angry as you want, but the power is in the city Groningen, in The Hague, you can’t easily change that’. Tjipko believes Shell, shareholder of the NAM: ‘is even more powerful than all of The Hague combined’. He concludes: ‘I don’t have any power, and I will also never get that’. Many people would attribute this sense of disempowerment to the Groninger mentality, which was already there before the gas extraction-related problems. Indeed, when I asked Tjipko whether he already had this distrust in politics and other powerful actors before the earthquakes, he confirmed that. Nevertheless, there are also other people, Groningers *and* import, who told me they felt powerless on a political level since and *because of* the gas extraction related problems. Rianne, who replied to my call for

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<sup>64</sup> In Dutch: Rijksbouwmeester.

respondents who did not actively resist, told me her trust in the national government had completely vanished:

I have always had trust and now not anymore at all. [...] [A]ll decisions are being made in a small, urbanised area, that is Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, with an extension to Utrecht, and these areas also have the most inhabitants. And those people are in a certain way ahead of the rest of the Netherlands and they can decide what happens. [...] [T]he people who determine policy do not live in this area [Groningen]' [my clarification].

When I asked her why she did not resist, she told me: 'demonstrations make me nervous, it feels like fighting windmills and like a waste of energy'. Nevertheless, Rianne did resist by initiating a legal procedure against the NAM. 'Hopefully the legal system in our country is still above board. So far, I have the experience that it is. However, should the legal system fail as well, it will be the bankruptcy of Dutch society for me.'

Because of the energy consuming damage claim and reinforcement processes, people often become exhausted, or *murw* they call it. As these processes are usually very lengthy and people often do not see the direct merits of resistance, they feel forced to quit their resistance or do not start resisting at all. Susan Top, secretary of the 'Groninger Gasberaad', told me about the GBB's former chair who felt forced to cease his resistance and 'flee' the province: 'at a certain point, it was either choosing for your own health or fighting to the death and still not making it'. Grietje Postma, owner of a heavily damaged old farm, told me that when her problems had started, she attempted to unite with others with mining damage. Nevertheless, Grietje told me this did not give her the strength she hoped it would:

[In such a group] you are powerless together. You share, you tell, and after a while you know about each other. You shrug your shoulders and go home again. [...] It also stopped a little bit from my side because the last few months I felt that I wasn't able to really deal with it and spend so much time on it. I see the importance of it, but sometimes my motivation decreases for such things. Because, I think, it also does me good to sometimes not deal with it. Also to keep my feet on the ground.

Grietje is one of many to feel that way. People often *have* to stop resisting, or do not start resisting at all, in order to stay healthy and to keep standing.

The feeling of disempowerment often results in shunning the idea of resistance as people feel like 'it does not help anyways'. The feelings of being incapable financially, skills-wise and politically, together with the lengthy damage claim and reinforcement processes and the lack of direct results of resistance make people feel cynical. In a mail, also responding to my call for 'not actively resisting people', Jeany Dober told me:

We told them [the NAM and CVW] that we do not want this [treatment]. But fighting? No that does not help anyways, they keep us in endless insecurity, it makes you ill, you visit a doctor multiple times, hospital, etcetera; the insecurity thus beats us. But we are not combative anymore. That has passed. It does not help. [my clarifications]

Here, Jeany hits the nail on its head: it is the insecurity that withholds people from resisting. Sometimes people optimistically try to solve their problems caused by gas extraction, like Grietje did by attempting to unite with others, but sooner or later they do not experience positive effects and therefore feel tempted or even necessitated to stop their resistance. In other cases, like Rianne's, their feeling of disempowerment already prevents them from resisting in the first place. People feel like they are not able to control their own lives by resisting, which only absorbs their energy and makes them feel more tired and cynical. Eventually, many people I have spoken to decide to reduce or even cease their resistance and choose to continue living their lives in other ways.

### **6.3 Acquiescence as coping mechanism**

*At a certain point, we were counting, you are dealing with it [resistance] about thirty hours in the week, forty hours in the week. [We] thought: now we want our own lives back. We're done. We're really done [with it]. [my clarification]*

- Trudy, affected homeowner and resister, yet on a lower level now.

Like Trudy and her husband Peter, many people quit or did not even start resisting in order to stay healthy and to maintain a certain sense of security – or at least to prevent an even bigger increase in insecurity. In some cases, acquiescence is not necessarily a free choice, but has become a coping mechanism in order to 'survive'.

I have encountered two broad coping mechanisms of acquiescence which people in Groningen adopt to deal with their gas extraction-related problems: one in which there is minimal change in behaviour and people try to continue living their lives like before (*passive acquiescence*), and in the other one, people actively focus on other, more controllable parts of their lives (*active acquiescence*). In order to explain these mechanisms and their functions, Anthony Giddens' notion of 'ontological security' is helpful. The concept 'refers to the confidence that most humans beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens 1990: 92). Ontological security is closely connected to routine: when events and actions are predictable, they provide a certain sense of security. But, Giddens warns, 'when such routines are shattered - for whatever reason - anxieties come flooding in, and even very firmly founded aspects of the personality of

the individual may become stripped away and altered' (ibid.: 98). In order to cope with such anxieties, which are based on dangers that cannot be individually controlled, people hold on to a new sense of fate, or 'fortuna'. This renewed, secularised belief in fate can be positive as well as negative and is a 'vague and generalised sense of trust in distant events over which one has no control' (ibid.: 133).

Giddens introduces four adaptive reactions which people adopt to cope with their (existential) anxieties: 'pragmatic acceptance', 'sustained optimism', 'cynical pessimism', and 'radical engagement'. The first three he calls 'privatist', or 'the avoidance of contestatory engagement', and 'can serve the purposes of day-to-day "survival" in many respects' (ibid.: 148). The last adaptive reaction of 'radical engagement', 'an attitude of practical contestation towards perceived sources of danger', is thus the only reaction with which people actively resist risky situations they are in (ibid.: 137). Giddens' classification of adaptive reactions is useful to explain the reactions of people in Groningen affected by gas extraction, as it illustrates how people either accept or contest that they cannot individually control dangers to which they are exposed. Inspired by Giddens, I have discerned three coping mechanisms which Groningers adopt to deal with the insecurity developed by gas extraction: 'passive acquiescence', 'active acquiescence' and 'resistance'. The first coping mechanism could incorporate Giddens' three adaptive reactions of privatism: 'pragmatic acceptance'<sup>65</sup>, 'sustained optimism', and 'cynical pessimism'. For my analysis, it is not necessary to subdivide the mechanism of 'passive acquiescence' into these categories, as they are all passive ways of coping with insecurity.

An example of the coping mechanism of passive acquiescence is that of Maartje Westland. This woman, who is a tenant of a house which was going to be reinforced, did a 180

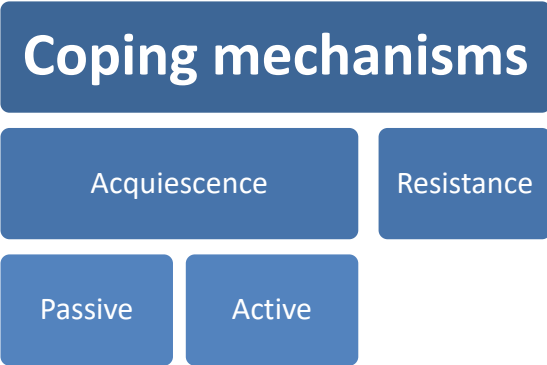


Figure 13: Coping mechanisms for dealing with insecurity.

<sup>65</sup> This adaptive reaction might be considered relatively active, but as it does not actively deal with the actual dangers people feel exposed to, I would classify it under 'passive acquiescence'.

degree turn in her attitude towards this reinforcement. When I met her, during a village dinner in the heart of the earthquake area, Maartje was very emotional and stressed. She felt treated unjustly and not taken seriously by her housing corporation and other parties related to the reinforcement of her home. When I interviewed her, Maartje told me she did not agree with the reinforcement plans and was fighting those together with a couple of neighbours and her lawyer. We kept in touch and when I received an email three months later I was baffled. She told me she and her husband had eventually accepted the reinforcement plans. 'But if we had blocked it, they would have been back in a year. Well, then we're keeping ourselves in uncertainty even longer'. She told me the reinforcement plans, which had been improved, reduced their stress and gave them much more space in their heads. Maartje's response to her insecure situation is thus an example of the first coping mechanism in which people do not resist, or in the case of Maartje, even stop resisting, accept their fates and attempt to continue living their lives like they used to.

With the coping mechanism of 'active acquiescence', on the other hand, people actively take control over parts of their lives they feel like they *can* control. This attitude could be added as a fifth 'adaptive reaction' in Giddens' framework. It is related to Giddens' 'pragmatic acceptance', defined as 'pragmatic participation which maintains a focus on day-to-day problems and tasks' (ibid.: 135). Nevertheless, with 'active acquiescence', people seek for other - not necessarily day-to-day - projects which helps them focus on something else than the 'uncontrollable' feeling of insecurity produced by gas extraction and its consequences. Such longer term projects are aimed at minimising the impact this feeling of insecurity has on their lives or at least at making the situation more bearable. The notion of 'active acquiescence' also replaces Giddens' 'acceptance' with the term 'acquiescence', which implies not just acceptance, but '*reluctant* acceptance', without protest ("Acquiescence" n.d.). Affected people in Groningen which adopted such an attitude of active acquiescence often did this *after* having tried to resist, or as an alternative to resistance, preferring to resist but realising that it will not help them maintain control over their lives.

In an interview, Tietsia, a former inhabitant of the 'earthquake centre', kept repeating that she wanted to regain control over her life. Tietsia and her family had experienced some eventful years: her husband Jur got heart problems, his company went bankrupt, and eventually he started to work abroad a couple of weeks per month. In the meantime, Tietsia worked full time and had to take care of her family of three children and their large, maintenance-intensive house. During this period, the earthquakes started to increase in size and impact. Also the home of Tietsia and Jur began to have damage and needed to be repaired. While the reparation and damage claim process went fine, Tietsia already then started to realise there were going to be a lot of problems: much money was being wasted on expensive damage restorations, communication with residents was inadequate, and houses became unsellable, making people

'imprisoned in this region'. Despite her anger and feeling of injustice, Tietsia did not resist as she did not feel she had to opportunity for this because of her personal circumstances (she had to spend all her time on working and taking care of her children and the household). Nevertheless, her feeling of insecurity rose to such a level that Tietsia and Jur eventually decided to put their house up for sale and move to the city Groningen, which had far less earthquake-related problems. In this way, Tietsia and Jur tried to take their fates in their own hands:

We made our own plan, to make it manageable for ourselves again. That's [the unmanageability] not only because of these earthquakes, but because they were there, we could not execute our plans in the way we initially wanted to. And that made me very angry, and that caused many sleepless nights. It feels very powerless and unreasonable. [...] All these causes [of our problems] are beyond your control. So that's annoying, you can't change that, you can't do anything about that. [...] [But] I'm very much like: just see what you can do, but we do have to keep the spirit up. And we do have to maintain control, like: what *can* we do? [my clarifications, Tietsia's emphasis]

Tietsia's feeling of disempowerment, the feeling that she was not able to change the sources of her problems, made her feel like resistance did not help. She did believe that she could (partly) retake control by moving away from the earthquake area and settle in a house which is smaller and thus easier to maintain.

Many people I have spoken to respond to their feeling of disempowerment in this way: if they can't control the gas extraction-related problems, then they will focus on other parts of their lives which they feel like they can control. Nevertheless, that does not mean they will become completely 'non-resistant'. Grietje Postma and her partner Klaas Bulder, who sometimes deliberately did not resist in order to 'keep their feet on the ground', decided to regain control by building their 1,5 hectares garden. Also, Grietje started a new education which gave renewed positive energy. Even though Grietje and Klaas also wanted to completely reinforce and rebuild their home and disconnect it from gas but needed to await the verdict of the arbitrator, they did already make plans for that: '[That] is something we can already do now. And that is something positive which keeps our spirits up', Grietje told me. They thus did not passively await their fate, but already actively took their own initiatives. This renewed their energy and gave them hope. This attitude, which initially made Grietje and Klaas minimalise their resistance, eventually made them feel more combative. Grietje: 'Perhaps because I get more energy from other parts of my life which makes me think: I'm not going to let it destroy myself and let my whole life be influenced by it'. So on the one hand, this coping mechanism decreases Grietje's resistance, but on the other hand it *reinforces* her endurance and will to resist. This second coping mechanism in which people regain control over their lives thus often results into non-resistance, like in Tietsia's case, but can also result in renewed and persistent resistance.

This is the difference between the motives behind passive acquiescence and active acquiescence: while the former mainly aims to regain a sense of (ontological) security as experienced *in the past*, the latter aims to create a *new* sense of security. As a consequence, most people who adopt the coping mechanism of passive acquiescence have become cynical, as they are not able to regain the security they experienced before they were affected by gas extraction. People who adopt an attitude of active acquiescence, on the other hand, are more optimistic, as they believe they are still able to regain a sense of security.

While active acquiescence can in this way lead to renewed resistance, it often takes on a more minimalised and less extreme form. Like Grietje, former 'front row activists' Trudy and Peter did not want their lives to be controlled by the gas extraction-related problems anymore and decided to continue resisting, 'but within the boundaries of normal life'. 'Sure, we are there, you can call on us, and we think along and participate, but not at the forefront anymore', Trudy told me. All in all, the second coping mechanism of 'active acquiescence', in which people focus on other parts of their lives than resistance, in some cases enables the persistence of resistance, yet on a lower level than before.

## **Conclusion**

Groninger resistance has been obstructed by; the self-reinforcing idea of 'Groninger folk nature'; tiredness created by lengthy processes; and the general sense of disempowerment caused by an experienced inequality in financial, human, and political capital. Instead of resisting, many Groningers have adopted coping mechanisms in order to maintain a sense of (individual) security. Nevertheless, as acquiescence means that there is no *active* resistance (yet) against the gas extraction policies, these will be maintained and therefore eventually the loop of insecurity is being reinforced (see figure 14). This chapter has however shown one entrance which hints at a possibility to break this vicious circle. *Active* acquiescence sometimes leads to a reinforced energy to continue resistance, but on a lower level. This persistence of resistance can force decision makers to change their neoliberal policies, which then might bring back a sense of security (see figure 15). The following chapter will further explore current resistance in Groningen and how it might either interrupt or maintain the loop of insecurity.



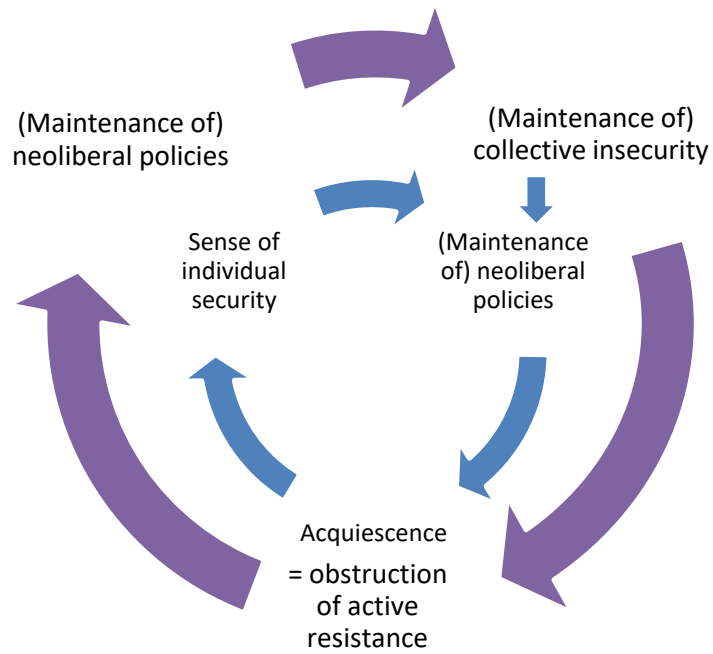


Figure 14: While acquiescence attempts to secure a sense of individual security (blue circle), at the same time, it reinforces the (collective) loop of insecurity (purple circle).

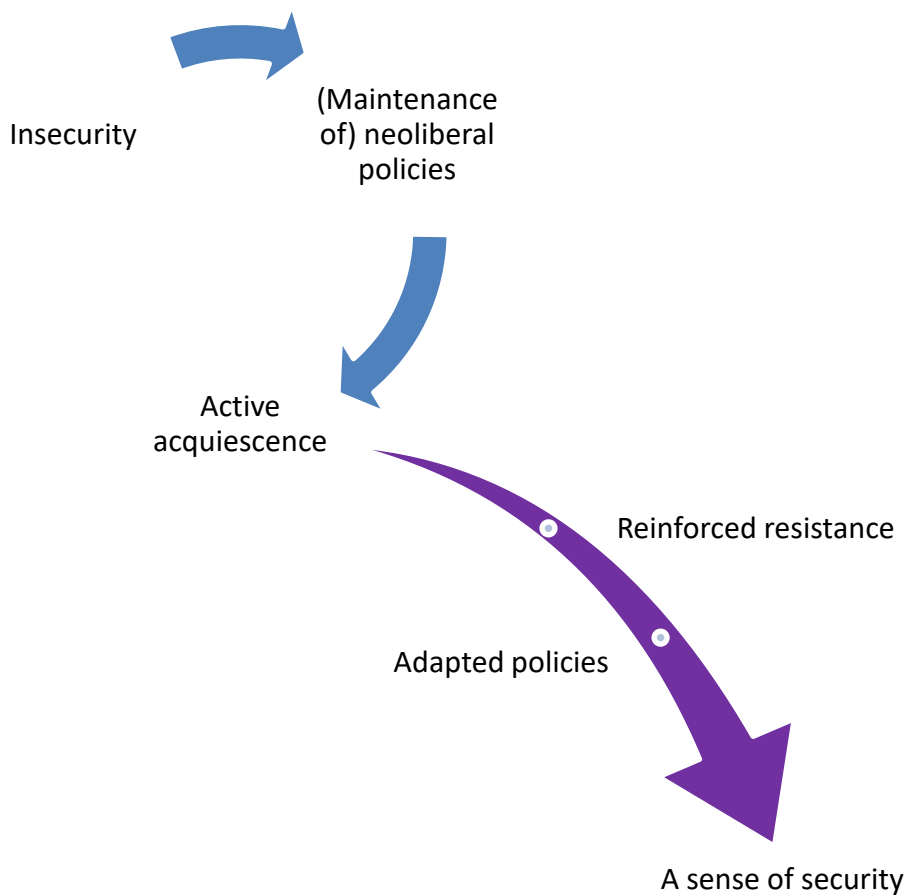


Figure 15: How active acquiescence provides opportunities for breaking the loop of insecurity.





*The torch procession of January 2018.<sup>66</sup>*

## **7. Resistance in a Neoliberal Age**

As the previous chapter illustrates, many Groningers refrain from resisting neoliberal gas extraction policies, due to a sense of disempowerment. This however does not mean that there has been no resistance at all in Groningen. Most of this contestation happens individually, as damage claim and reinforcement processes have been set up in an individualised manner. Yet, collective action and interest groups have formed, and cunningly make use of non-traditional instruments, such as the media, ‘neoliberal’ political platforms (incorporating both multinationals as well as civil society organisations, protecting their ‘individual’ interests<sup>67</sup>), and the legal system. In the current neoliberal era, these channels turn out to be more effective means for contesting neoliberal gas extraction policies than public demonstration. Nevertheless, the downside to this effective, more ‘skilled’ resistance is that some groups of people are not able to participate, resulting into even more fragmentation.

### **7.1 Individualism versus collectivism**

*People aren't thinking about it, they aren't dealing with it, [they are] neglecting it, thinking 'everything is managed properly, what are you worrying about?'. [...] [P]eople do not interfere with their neighbours, but are busy with their own troubles. [...] Now it is covered by the media, it starts to bubble up a bit. Now [some] people are starting to rise up. The residents, the tenants, one by one. But still everyone for himself, and not collectively. Only when the bulldozers are at the door [they wake up]. [Martin's clarifications, added later]*

- Martin, affected resident and resister.

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<sup>66</sup> <https://nos.nl/artikel/2157033-duizenden-groningers-in-optocht-tegen-gaswinning.html>. Original source: ANP.

<sup>67</sup> <sup>67</sup> According to David Harvey, legally, corporations are seen as individuals (2005: 64).

The above illustrates the character of most resistance to gas extraction-related policies. If people contest gas extraction and its consequences, they mostly do this in an individual manner, not uniting with others, but standing up for themselves by personally opposing NAM spokespersons and representatives of related organisations. According to Peter, the environmental activist, this individual resistance appears to be a direct result of the NAM strategy to consciously deal with damage per individual household in order to make the damage claimants feel powerless. Every house has different damage, is inspected by different engineers, who make different assessments of the damage and make different calculations of compensations. In this way, no damage case and its treatment is the same, which makes it difficult for people to empathise and unite with each other (see also chapter 5.2). As people first want to have their own damage repaired, they will have to undergo the formal damage claim process, which is exclusively individual of character. During the entire damage claim process, from the moment people report damage until the possibility for people to object the NAM's offer<sup>68</sup> through the arbitrator or after that the court, people formally are not in contact with other residents affected by gas extraction. Some people even told me about confidentiality agreements, also reported on in the media, which obstruct possibilities for people to compare received compensations ("NAM vraagt geheimhouding" n.d.).

The individual damage claim process set up by the NAM is in line with neoliberal thought, where 'each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being' (Harvey 2005: 65). Nevertheless, there is a 'growing lack of symmetry in the power relation between corporations and individuals' (ibid.: 79), which makes it increasingly difficult for the latter to stand up for their (individual) rights. The NAM employs a big and expensive legal department, which is trained to defend the corporation against damage claim- and other disputes. Individuals often do not believe they have the money nor the skills to defend themselves via court (see chapter 6.2). As the neoliberal state is withdrawing itself from protecting citizens (c.f. Harvey 2005), because they are 'self-responsible', people affected by gas extraction also do not feel supported by the state.

The individual damage claim processes often take an extremely long time, sometimes even years, due to which people entangled in such processes cannot find the energy and time to also be involved in collective resistance. The e-mail below, which was sent to me in December 2017, will illustrate how much time and energy damage claim- and other processes, like reinforcement, cost:

Since December 2014 I am living in the earthquake area, knowing that the house I bought has damage in the kitchen floor. This really has to be tackled at the root,

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<sup>68</sup> Later CVW and now 'Temporary Committee Mining Damage Groningen'.

otherwise it will keep coming up (costs € 50.000 - € 60.000, which I had not foreseen at the purchase of the house [...]). However, the NAM argued that it wasn't earthquake damage, but subsidence damage, to which they are not liable. This process is still running.

In the meantime, I was confronted with the reinforcement of houses, which solves this problem. [...] Researches have been executed. Then for 1,5 years nothing happened, a - naturally - very difficult time during which I had to put a lot of time into this hassle, but I was not getting anywhere.

[...] At the moment, a budget is being created for the reinforcement work and we will get into a discussion on what the NAM will have to pay and what will become an 'improvement', which I will need to pay. Next to that, I will have to think about how I want to set up my house [...] because everything will be gutted and 'rebuilt'. [...] When the work is being executed, I can't live there and I'll have to go to an exchange house. I believe I'll have to find that myself, but I have no idea how. [...] Two relocations. [...] At least time-consuming.

When I asked Laura, the sender of the e-mail, whether she participated in collective actions, she told me:

I'm in it for myself. [...] It is good to share experiences (I participate in that), but I have no time to investigate things in general [...]. Soon I will have to investigate something, then I will share my experiences, but for now I don't take the lead. I also don't participate in protest actions of the GBB. [...] I am a member (doesn't cost anything), but there it ends for me.

Laura's case illustrates how individual action can take up all of people's energy and time, which discourages them to take any further collective action.

Nevertheless, some affected Groningers realised that the root of their problems, the gas extraction itself, could not be solved individually. This was the reason why many of the Groninger collective resisters started joining action or interest groups. Yet most of the people I have spoken only started participating in collective action after they had first tried to solve their problems individually. After all, according to anthropologist John Gledhill 'in conditions of great social stress and hardship, individualistic responses often seem more viable than pursuing collective utopias' (Gledhill 2000: 204).

## 7.2 Neoliberal resistance

*The start of 2014, a decision was made by former Minister of Economic Affairs Kamp about the [gas] extraction plan. [...] I said, you know what? We are going to do a demonstration every week. Every week on the same day. Every time on a special location. Then every week there will be more people, because of the media and such. The first time 150 people came, the last time was in*

*Middelstum, 300 people. While we had a lot of media attention [and] the [Second] Chamber members joined us. They were going to speak [at the demonstrations]. There was a lot of publicity, yet the people stayed home.*

- Jelle van der Knoop, chairman of interest group GBB.

Except for the torch procession of 2018, which attracted thousands of protesters, Groninger interest groups have not been successful in attracting many participants for demonstrations. Nevertheless, Groningers have found different, perhaps less traditional ways to resist: through the media, 'neoliberal' political platforms (in which non-political actors, like civil society groups, but especially corporations protect their 'individual' interests), and the legal system. In this neoliberal era, the use of these instruments appears to be more effective than public demonstration.

Groningers have been very effective in attracting the attention of the media. At first and still now, mostly individuals have told their stories in the media in order to claim their right. For example, my research participant Kees Houtman told me the NAM started to seriously look at his case when he attracted too much publicity: 'We can't help but think that the NAM is in motion now because they want to get rid of my file. [...] I am too bad for PR'. Through the years, the action/interest groups have also become more 'media savvy'. Jelle van der Knoop, the GBB chairman, told me the media have been an important channel to reach politicians. If the media is present during actions, it is not even necessary to organise big mobs. This was one of the



Figure 16: Groningen's torch procession in 2018.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.nu.nl/slideshow/1915539.html>.

reasons why the demonstrations of 2014, described in this paragraph's opening quote, had not failed: the media reports had attracted attention of people all over the country, including perhaps the most important: the politicians. Professional environmental interest groups have helped Groninger action and interest groups professionalise their media and resistance techniques. The torch procession, in which thousands of people participated in 2018, is an example of a photogenic image – partially initiated and supported by 'media-experienced' environmental organisation 'Milieudefensie' - which is very appealing for the media to report about (see figure 16). Such extensive media coverage is especially successful in targeting the multinational NAM. According to journalist and activist Naomi Klein, multinational corporations are often easier to target in such ways than politicians, as the former need to protect their brand. As negative publicity will harm this brand, multinationals will do everything to prevent this from occurring. Klein argues that – as in this neoliberal era multinationals have become more powerful than governments - activists will eventually reach politicians through these multinationals (Klein [2000] 2010: 343).

Groninger action and interest groups have also established direct connections with politicians, regionally as well as nationally. As explained before, in March 2014, the 'Dialogotafel' was founded, a negotiation table which included the representatives of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Province of Groningen, several Groninger 'earthquake municipalities', the NAM, and several civil society organisations, including the GBB. While the 'Dialogotafel' had already been terminated in 2015, the National Coordinator Groningen continued talking with administrators



*Figure 17: members of the GBB informing the Minister of Economic Affairs Eric Wiebes. The media is present on the right..*

in the 'Administrative Steering Group' and civil society organisations (the 'Gasberaad' and the GBB) in the 'Social Steering Group', and separately he continued negotiating with the NAM, the Minister of EA(C) did this as well. All the parties which had participated in the 'Dialogotafel' thus continued to be involved, although they did not always directly encounter each other anymore. I call the negotiation tables in which these actors participate 'neoliberal political platforms', as the multinational NAM as well as civil society organisations are included to protect their interests. I believe this negotiation structure is based on the neoliberal doctrine of the individual responsibility to stand up for itself.<sup>70</sup> The neoliberal state thus does not naturally protect its citizens, like the social democratic state aimed before, but transfers this responsibility to the individual (c.f. Harvey 2005: 76).

In a way, these neoliberal political platforms have given the Groninger interest groups much influence in formal decision making processes. For example, when a new concept damage protocol, in which earthquake damage handling procedures are stipulated, was presented by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the GBB and shortly after the 'Groninger Gasberaad' decided to leave the negotiations as they did not accept the new plans. Soon after that, Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Wiebes hastened to talk with them and convince them to return to the negotiations. The Groninger organisations only did this after they and the Minister had agreed on the inclusion of certain elements of the damage protocol ("Gasberaad en GBB terug" 2018). GBB chairman Jelle told me:

At the moment, it might sound a little arrogant, if we say 'it should go like this', it will go like that. The province and the mayors told Alders [the NCG]: we want a protocol with social support. That means that only happens if we [the Social Steering Group] say 'yes'. [my clarifications]

In this manner, by being included as an important member of negotiation tables, or otherwise having much influence on these, the Groninger action and interest groups have been able to assert much influence on decision making processes related to gas extraction and its consequences in Groningen.

As said before, the legal system is another important area of resistance. As David Harvey already wrote: 'Given that neoliberal theory centres on the rule of law and a strict interpretation of constitutionality, it follows that conflict and opposition must be mediated through the courts. Solutions and remedies to any problems have to be sought by individuals through the legal system' (2005: 66-67). The NAM and the state indeed put much weight on legal constructions. As said before, the NAM (as well as – naturally - the state) employs a large legal department. I have heard of cases, for example the Boukema's, in which the NAM advised people they could not

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<sup>70</sup> According to David Harvey, legally, corporations are seen as individuals (2005: 64).



reach an agreement with to go to the court. However, through the years many affected Groningers have been supported by the legal system. A lot of affected residents have won court cases, due to which the NAM had to adjust their offers or meet the affected people in other ways (think of Hiltje Zwarberg, as described in chapter 5). Nevertheless, a caveat must be made here. The legal system is not as accessible to everyone. Prosecution often costs individuals a lot of money, which most people don't have. Menno and Martje Boukema, the retired farmers with big damage, told me that the famous resister Annemarie Heite informed them prosecution would cost between 60.000 and 80.000 euros. 'And still then it is not sure whether you'll win of the lawyers of Shell', Menno sighed. Lawyer costs can be saved if people conduct the defence themselves, like resisters Martin and Pieta have done: 'We are also good at that, we are trying to find the arguments ourselves by reading a lot, combing through a lot. There are things we know now', Pieta told me. However, most people would not be able to do this. Martin and Pieta both have a background in communication and are very capable of expressing themselves, verbally as well as in writing. Sometimes, organisations like 'Stut-en-Steun'<sup>71</sup>, and 'Recht voor Groningen'<sup>72</sup> are able to support affected people legally through financial means as well as by providing direct legal counsel, but here too (financial) resources are limited.

In order to still claim their right through court, groups of people and organisations have united and together prosecuted the NAM and/or the state. One big case I attended was the one in which the WAG foundation and housing corporations sued the NAM for not directly compensating housing value decline. The judges decided that the prosecuting parties were right and the NAM has to compensate the value decrease of houses, even before they are sold (Gerechtshof Arnhem-Leeuwarden 2018). Also the GBB is running several cases, including a criminal case against the NAM. But perhaps the most important cases that affected Groningers have won were those which forced the former Minister of Economic Affairs to reduce the volume of gas extraction in 2015 and 2017 ("Raad van State" 2017). The prosecutors of these cases were a cooperation of the Province of Groningen, several Groninger municipalities, other regional authorities, interest groups like the 'Gasberaad', GBB, and environmental organisations, and some affected individuals.<sup>73</sup> By uniting and in this way collecting more expertise and financial capacity, Groningers have found ways to still make use of the otherwise not so accessible legal system.

Other forms of resistance which appear to be effective in the current 'neoliberal age' also sometimes are not accessible to everyone. I noticed that many of the actions organised by the

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<sup>71</sup> This organisation independently advises, helps and supports people affected by Groninger gas extraction on a wide range of aspects related to the consequences of gas extraction.

<sup>72</sup> A foundation set up by the GBB to financially support law suits.

<sup>73</sup> In the last case, even the NAM was a prosecutor as it claimed the state did not devise clear safety frameworks for gas extraction.

GBB, 'Gasberaad' and other action and interest groups required certain skills. For example a report of the 'Groninger Gasberaad' about an action event, reads as follows:

After the break, the audience divides itself into five groups, to prepare for the visit of the [Second] Chamber committee to Groningen, to write a letter to the new Minister, to think about actions, to research legal procedures and to write an open letter to the Groningers (Groninger Gasberaad 2017).

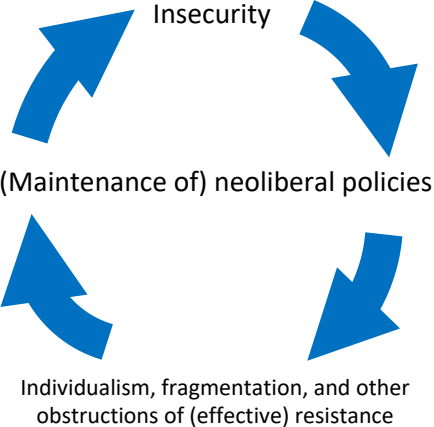
Most of these actions require certain skills, like writing and legal know-how, which not every common person will possess. This does not mean that people cannot participate in such actions at all, but it is likely that people with some education and/or experience on certain areas will be more capable and confident to execute such tasks. During a meeting of monument owners I noticed something similar. There, a man said that he found it difficult to keep up with the discussion as the speakers were jumping from topic to topic. It also became clear to me that this man wasn't as up-to-date as others, and some 'basic' knowledge about gas extraction-related organisations and practices needed to be explained to him. A lot of reading and keeping up needs to be done in order to participate in these action and interest groups.

As active members of such action/interest groups need to possess certain skills in order to function well, the result is that most of them appear to have a higher education background (Jelle believed this as well). According to social scientists Walter Nicholls and Justus Uitermark, the risk of this is that 'such wielding of power [by intellectuals] may marginalize others within movements. They may simply not be represented and there may even be cases where the discourses espoused by intellectuals delegitimize and marginalize weaker groups within the movement (Nicholls and Uitermark 2015: 189, my clarification). In Groningen, I sometimes sensed that people did not feel represented by the (leaders of) bigger action/interest groups, like the GBB. For example, some tenants felt like they were being left out or forgotten by representatives, as most leading activists were private homeowners and consequently tenants experienced a focus on the interests of homeowners. Additionally, some affected Groningers were critical of the, what they called 'moderate' resistance of the GBB. These people felt dissatisfied about compromises the GBB had made and wanted the GBB to strive for much bigger achievements. These critical GBB members often felt like the actions of the GBB were not extreme enough: instead of negotiating with the state and NAM, and joining non-violent actions like occupations of NAM and CVW offices, some activists advocated for more extreme actions, like blocking gas extraction sites. The tactics the bigger action/interest groups are employing in Groningen, have been set up according to the expertise and most likely also the norms and values of the higher educated and assumingly higher class leaders of these groups. As the actions of these leaders sometimes do not align with the actions preferred by the 'rank and file'

action/interest group members, this creates tension and fragmentation within these groups. As a result, sometimes members split off and form new action groups and in other cases members become less active or even fully cease their resistance. Because of this, the fragmentation of Groninger resistance exacerbates, resulting into less leverage in the political field.

**Conclusion**

While the previous chapter has demonstrated that ‘active acquiescence’ – which sometimes reinforces the energy to resist - provides an opportunity for breaking the loop of insecurity, this chapter has unfortunately illustrated that Groninger resistance has not become strong enough yet to actually interrupt this vicious cycle. Firstly, this is because individualised damage claim and reinforcement processes have resulted in the according individual nature of most Groninger resistance. Secondly, while Groninger collective resistance has found ways to effectively contest neoliberal gas extraction-related policies, the skills and sometimes resources such resistance requires, leads to the withdrawal of less educated and less prosperous people, who feel misrepresented and marginalised. As a result, the effectively resisting group of people fragmentises and in this way is not able to influence neoliberal policy making to such an extent that it interrupts the loop of insecurity (see figure 18).



*Figure 18: The loop of insecurity, maintained by individualism, fragmentation, and other obstructions of (effective) resistance.*

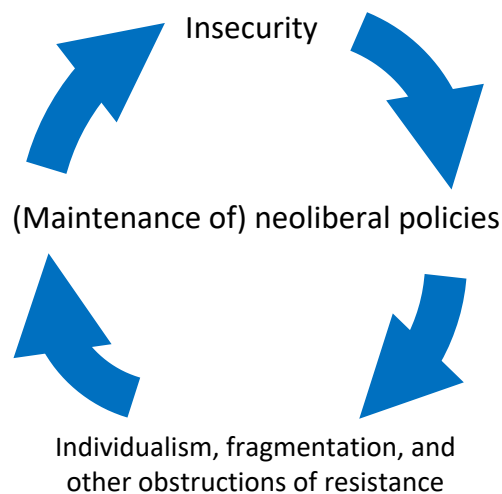




*'Loppersum wants to strut like a perky peacock again': a shop window in the 'earthquake region'.*

## Conclusion: Will the Loop of Insecurity Be Broken?

The narrative as told in this thesis is not one about gas extraction, earthquakes and unsafety per se. It is about a much broader sense of insecurity about future safety, well-being and self-determination. This insecurity is being maintained and reinforced in a loop: Groninger insecurity, once developed by the unpredictable, mining-induced earthquakes, is further produced by neoliberal policies which determine damage claim and reinforcement processes. These policies - and strategies which ensure the maintenance of these policies - centralise individualism and profit maximisation and in this way produce further individualism, fragmentation and other obstructions of (effective) resistance, like tiredness, and feelings of disempowerment. As a result, Groninger resistance is not strong enough to enforce the adjustment of these policies. Consequentially, such policies are being maintained and continue to produce and reinforce feelings of insecurity, thereby completing the cycle (once again portrayed in figure 19). Up until the writing of this thesis at the end of 2018, this loop is going on and on, continually aggravating feelings of insecurity.



*Figure 19: the loop of insecurity.*

Through the self-perpetuating loop of insecurity, this thesis has provided a processual analysis of the power dynamics that have developed in Groningen. Although simplified, the loop clarifies how the actions of actors (with diverging interests) maintain and even reinforce the status quo, but also shows opportunities for where this status quo can be altered, elaborated on below. This thesis has illustrated that power contestation is dynamic and layered. Resistance can be repressed, yet coping mechanisms in response to such repression can also incite (renewed) resistance. Moreover, resistance and 'non-resistance' are not binary, dichotomous categories (c.f. Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). Between lies acquiescence, or 'reluctant acceptance' ("Acquiescence" n.d.) and can easily transform into either 'non-resistance' or resistance. Persons do not statically remain in one of the states of non-resistance, acquiescence, or resistance, but switch between these, depending on their energy and feelings of (dis)empowerment. Groninger collective resistance also shows such a dynamic character. My thesis demonstrates how resistance in Groningen has grown and has become relatively successful in 'neoliberalism-effective domains', like the media, the law and 'neoliberal political platforms', but – because of individualising policies and the skills required for such 'neoliberal resistance' - Groninger resistance has also become fragmented and therefore less powerful.

On paper, much appears to have changed in Groningen. On 31 January 2018, finally a new damage protocol was presented, which abandoned the 'contour lines' that determined whether damage could be related to gas extraction, and 'definitively put the NAM at a distance' (Jach and Miskovic 2018). Two months later, on 29 March 2018, Minister Wiebes announced that Groninger gas extraction will be terminated by 2030 (elaborated on in the 'epilogue'). While this was experienced as a big victory, Groningers continue to experience grave sentiments of insecurity. People do not know how many and how strong earthquakes will yet occur, but they do know they will still tremble the Groninger soil for years, or most likely even for decades. People do not know whether their houses will have to be reinforced or not, and if not, whether their houses will be safe enough. People do not know whether they will be able to sell their houses, and thus whether they will remain 'imprisoned' in their own homes. In short, the loop of insecurity remains unbroken.

Nevertheless, chapter 6 has pointed to an opportunity for bringing back a sense of security: the coping mechanism of 'active acquiescence'. While 'passive acquiescence' is aimed at bringing back the sense of security as experienced in the past – which is almost impossible at the moment - active acquiescence seems to create a *new*, adapted feeling of security. By focussing on projects that do not directly deal with the consequences of gas extraction, Groningers who adopt the coping mechanism of active acquiescence eventually find renewed energy, sometimes leading to reinforced combativeness. In this way, active acquiescence can bring back both an *individual* sense of security – by regaining control over one's life – as well as a more *collective*

sense of security, as it renews the energy to resist and therefore strengthens Groninger resistance's opportunity to influence neoliberal gas extraction policies. I should clarify that if people experience a returned 'sense' of security, that does not mean that people actually feel *safe*. Martin and Pieta told me that Groningers *are* and *remain* unsafe. People will feel safer if gas extraction will be terminated quickly and if their houses will be reinforced properly and speedily, in order to make them resistant to future earthquakes and soil subsidence. However, active acquiescence has illustrated to return a sense of self-determination, which energises people and sometimes contributes to a revival of resistance. Such resistance might stimulate the alteration of gas extraction policies in such ways that it increases Groningers' feelings of (ontological) security *as well as* (physical) safety.

Unfortunately, chapter 7 has shown that active acquiescence is not powerful enough yet to break the loop of insecurity. While active acquiescence revives the energy to resist, the resulting resistance is often either individualised or fragmented. The focus of most Groninger resistance lies on specific individual goals (e.g. damage claims) instead of overarching, collective ones (like *quick* termination of gas extraction), and Groninger resistance groups often emphasise their differences instead of their common interests. As a consequence, the Groninger 'voice' is not powerful enough to alter the individualising and fragmenting neoliberal gas extraction policies. There would be much opportunity for strengthening Groninger resistance if the resistance groups would formulate clear common goals and would unite to accomplish these.

Additionally, as David Harvey suggests, more effort could be made for the union of movements with perhaps diverging specific interests, but similar transcendent goals (Harvey 1989; 1996; 2005). According to Harvey, social, oppositional movements 'are relatively empowered to organize in *place*, but disempowered when it comes to organizing over *space*' (1989: 303, my emphasis). By holding onto place-bound organisation, such oppositional groups 'become a part of the very fragmentation which a mobile capitalism and flexible accumulation [or in the case of Groningen, neoliberalism] can feed upon' (ibid., my addition). Groninger resistance could thus gain much by uniting with other oppositional movements, who do not necessarily have the same, place-related interests, but do have parallel objectives on a more abstract level. Groninger gas-extraction related interest groups could for example try to make stronger connections with environmental advocacy groups, who advocate for renewable energy instead of the polluting natural gas. This already occurs with organisations like 'Milieudefensie' and 'Code Rood'<sup>74</sup>, but closer and more organised cooperation could reach an even bigger group of resisters and yield more achievements. Also, more efforts can be made for uniting on an *international* level, with others made insecure by comparable neoliberal processes. Some steps

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<sup>74</sup> 'Code Rood' is a 'cooperation of people who fight against the fossil industry and her power' (Code Rood n.d.).

have been made towards this, for example by the Native American Sioux tribe of Standing Rock, which has been dispossessed of its land by the building of a pipeline and just like the Groningers has to fight against multinationals and a (neoliberal) government. These Native Americans showed their support for the Groningers by joining a protest picnic in Groningen, organised by 'Milieudefensie' (Zaalberg 2017). Nevertheless, here too stronger, longer term cooperation would be necessary, looking beyond direct, local purposes and transcending to more abstract objectives of security, in order to make a stronger case and attract more companions in the fight against insecurity developed by neoliberal policies. A bigger and more united resistance movement will also have more leverage in international political platforms, like the European Union and the United Nations, which are able to pressure governments and perhaps even multinationals to adjust the policies which produce and reinforce insecurity.

All in all, a combination of adopting the coping mechanism of active acquiescence as well as aiming at the union of resistance movements against insecurity, could provide opportunity for bringing back a sense of security to the Groningers (see figure 20). Hopefully for the Groningers, this will finally bring the loop of insecurity to an end.

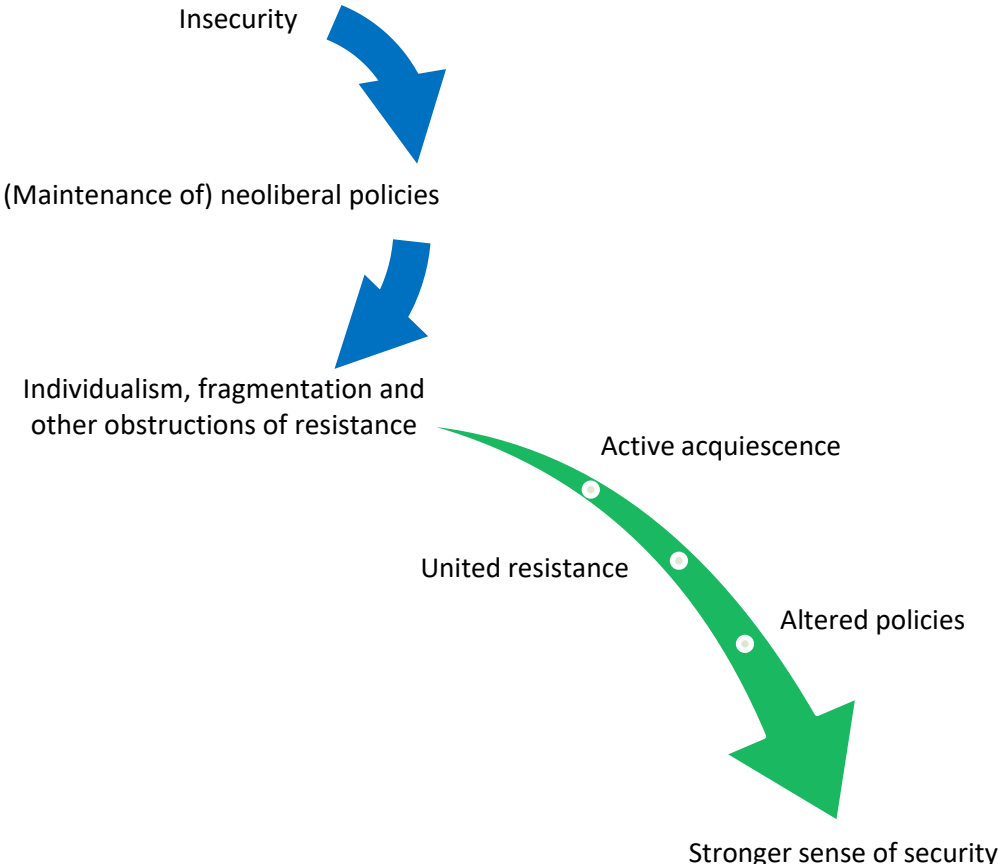


Figure 20: Breaking the loop of insecurity.





*The Groninger flag lowered half-mast after the earthquake at Zeerijp.<sup>75</sup>*

## **Epilogue: 'We Have Become Different People'**

Much has changed since I have left Groningen.<sup>76</sup> It started with the big earthquake at Zeerijp, on January 8<sup>th</sup> 2018, which was the heaviest quake since the one of Huizinge in 2012. When the earthquake of 3.4 on the Richter Scale occurred, I was already back from the field and was in a meeting at work in Amsterdam. While we were in discussion, a co-worker, knowing about my research topic, read out loud from his phone: 'big earthquake in Groningen'. I was shocked and immediately started contacting my closest research participants. Luckily, I heard that none of them were injured. Soon after, also the media reported that no persons were injured. Some of my research participants responded surprisingly calmly or even cynically. Others were shocked or afraid, but at the same time showed an impressively courageous attitude. An e-mail sent to me by Menno and Martje Boukema, the retired farmers, illustrates this:

[T]hat feels good you know, such an expression of sympathy.

We have received so many this time, but most of them with: do you also have damage?

Yes, we have reported damage again, but because we are already waiting for almost a year on a new damage protocol, we are case 5000 and whatever on the waiting list.....

By now we have three big file boxes full about the damages.

But the damage is not the worst thing.

Again you fall victim to all kinds of emotions ,

Fear, now for the first time; it was really frightening.

Anger, 3.4 is hundred times as bad as 2.4 and they are expecting even heavier hits.

Cynicism, will they have become awake in The Hague and at the NAM?

Resignation, we will see ; we will appear in the newspaper, in talk shows, questions in the [Second] Chamber and still for years we will remain in this situation.

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<sup>75</sup> <https://www.rtvnoord.nl/nieuws/188587/Groningse-vlag-hangt-halfstok-uit-verdriet-na-beving-Zeerijp>.

<sup>76</sup> Due to space constraints, I am not able to overview all relevant events that have occurred since I have left Groningen.

Indecision, shall we repair [the damage] or not, shall we sell [the house] or not, after this hit the value has plummeted again, investing in asbestos removal yes or no....

Do we want to stay in this region, which we love so much and in which we have become so rooted by now. Here we understand each other, everybody has the same misery, somewhere else it's not in people's minds.

Because; our life has been disrupted, the humiliating way in which we have been treated by the Arbitrator Soil Movement,<sup>77</sup> we still have not got over that.

We have become different people, our trust is gone, we have become more cynical and get angry sooner. This is not how we were, as level-headed Groningers.

But in the mean time we just go on. We directly went to the cinema for a beautiful movie. Tonight we are going out again (Frisian Horse Show) and we are healthy and happy.

The green manure here in front of the house has been ploughed over the frost yesterday, the land lies smooth and shiny in a gentle sun[light] underneath sheep clouds. We are enjoying it! [my clarifications]

This e-mail tellingly shows what being stuck in a loop of insecurity does to people. Menno and Martje say they have become 'different people' (others said this as well). At the same time, they courageously continue living their lives. In a later e-mail, the Boukema's told me they have decided to stay in the region, even in the same village, yet in a newly built, 'earthquake-resistant' house. They were looking forward to living without stress and worries, they wrote me.

Shortly after the earthquake at Zeerijp, the Minister of Economic Affairs Eric Wiebes and also the NAM responded that gas production should be heavily reduced 'as quickly as possible'. They also expressed that a new damage protocol should soon be put in operation ("NAM komt vandaag" 2018) ("Wiebes: 'Nederland moet'" 2018). Nevertheless, on January 16<sup>th</sup>, the GBB and the 'Gasberaad' left the negotiation table for the new damage protocol, as they were dissatisfied with the concept protocol that the Ministry of Economic Affairs had devised ("Groninger Bodem Beweging" 2018).

In the meantime, the GBB, 'Milieudefensie', the 'Gasberaad' and multiple other organisations organised another, fourth torch procession on January 19<sup>th</sup>, as described in the introduction of this thesis. The media extensively reported the event, which was joined by many (national) politicians and other celebrities. Supposedly (partly) thanks to this big, awareness creating demonstration, the national state, the Province and local administrators quickly tried to meet the demands of the GBB and 'Gasberaad' for the new damage protocol (Groninger Bodem Beweging 2018a). Subsequently, the interest groups joined the negotiations again and finally, on January 31<sup>st</sup> a new damage protocol was presented, which the GBB and 'Gasberaad' supported (Jach and Miskovic 2018). Nevertheless, many people criticised the new protocol for not

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<sup>77</sup> In Dutch: Arbitrator Bodembeweging.

including the 'old' damage claims, submitted before 31 March 2017, which meant that the NAM would still process these.

On the exact same day the new damage protocol was presented, the thus far secret gas extraction contract between the NAM and the state of 1963 was revealed by 76 year old farmer Sijbrand Nijhoff. The farmer had for years been fighting against gas extraction, and had somehow gotten hold of the highly secret contract. The content was shocking: the Dutch state turned out to play a much bigger role in gas extraction than previously thought: next to the distribution and sale of Groninger gas, the state was also responsible for the exploitation and extraction of gas (Stiller 2018: 141). According to the lawyers of Nijhoff, this made both the NAM *and* the state liable to the consequences of gas extraction (Wind 2018).

On March 29<sup>th</sup>, the Minister of Economic Affairs Wiebes presented the new gas decision. Responding to an alarming advice of the SodM to quickly reduce gas extraction, the Minister informed the Second Chamber that by 2022 the gas extraction level should be reduced to 12 billion cubic meters, and after that gas production should fully be terminated by 2030 (Wiebes 2018). This was experienced as a great victory throughout Groningen, although people are aware that twelve more years of gas extraction will mean that its consequences will still be felt for a long period.

There was yet another big issue left for Minister Wiebes to negotiate about: the reinforcement operation. While his predecessor Henk Kamp had spoken of the reinforcement of 22.000 to 60.000 houses, Minister Wiebes heavily wanted to reduce this gigantic operation to 'only' a couple of thousand houses (Stiller 2018: 78). On 22 May 2018, another period of insecurity arrived for the Groningers: Minister Wiebes put the reinforcement plans on hold to first await several studies. This included the interruption of the reinforcement plans for 1580 houses which were already far in the investigation process. On May 30<sup>th</sup>, NCG Hans Alders announced that he resigned, declaring that he did not agree with these plans ("Alders stapte op" 2018). Alders' resignation caused much upheaval, which was increased when a leaked document showed the continued involvement of the NAM (Miskovic 2018b). Other than Minister Wiebes claimed, the NAM still turned out to play a big role in the reinforcement operation, which the resigning NCG Alders later confirmed (De Boer 2018).

The above displays the state of affairs in Groningen during the writing of this thesis up until mid-November 2018. Other than the Groningers – and I - had hoped, the province remains in a persistent state of insecurity.



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