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Going too far in the battle against concentration? On the balance between supply and demand of social housing in Dutch cities

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Abstract

In the second half of the 1990s Dutch urban housing policy shifted from urban renewal to urban restructuring and the creation of more socially mixed neighbourhoods. Motives for restructuring stem from the ongoing debates on concentration, segregation and social mix. Here, we focus on the main instruments of urban restructuring, i.e. the demolition of social housing and the construction of more expensive rental and owner-occupied housing. Continued restructuring may eventually lead to a shortage of social rented dwellings for low-income households, the target group of social housing. An important political question is therefore whether the dwindling supply of social housing still matches the potential demand in the target group. We addressed this question with an analysis of three Dutch cities: Rotterdam, The Hague, and Breda. The results indicate that, although demolition has brought about substantial changes, the share of social rented housing remains high in most restructuring neighbourhoods and restructuring has not resulted in concentrations of social rented housing in other, non-restructuring neighbourhoods in any of the three cities. In Rotterdam, which had a very large social housing stock at the beginning of the restructuring operation, there are still sufficient affordable homes for lower-income households. However, in The Hague and Breda, restructuring has tightened the supply of social rental housing. The municipal authority in The Hague has attempted to remedy the situation by entering regional agreements to secure sufficient levels of affordable housing.

1. Introduction

In 1997 the focus of Dutch urban housing policy shifted from ‘traditional’ urban renewal to urban restructuring and the creation of more socially diverse neighbourhoods (MVRM, 1997, 2000). The motives run parallel to the ongoing academic and Dutch policy debate on concentration, segregation and social mix (see e.g. Van Kempen & Priemus, 2002; Kleinmans, 2004). Although the pace of the Dutch restructuring programme is currently slowing down (mostly due to the economic crisis), it is scheduled to run for several more years. The main instrument of implementation is the demolition of cheap social housing on the one hand and the construction of more expensive rental and owner-occupied housing on the other. Inevitably, this approach will reduce the stock of affordable social housing (Van Kempen & Priemus, 2002, p. 247). Thus, continued restructuring may eventually lead to a situation with insufficient social rented stock for low-income households, the *target group* of social housing. This political fear has been heightened amid the continuing economic crisis by the looming prospect of job losses and corporate reorganisations which will cut deeply into the income of many households. Although there has been ample research into the implications of restructuring for neighbourhoods and individual residents, the question whether the remaining supply of social housing will be able to meet the demand has barely been addressed in research. In this paper we aim to shed light on this issue. Our analysis addressed two questions:

1. To what extent have urban restructuring areas witnessed a significant change in the share of social rented housing as opposed to other residential areas?
2. To what extent does the dwindling supply of social rented housing match the changes in (quantitative) demand in the target group?

Our analysis involved the second- and third-largest cities in the Netherlands, i.e. Rotterdam and The Hague, and the medium-sized city of Breda. We begin below with a brief account of the policy developments in the Dutch social rented sector. This is followed by an extensive analysis of the three cities. The last section contains a discussion and conclusions.

2. Policy developments in the Dutch social rented sector

The Dutch rental market is dominated by housing associations. Nationally, the market share of the housing associations reached its peak at the end of the 1980s (see Table 1). It gradually declined after 1995, reaching 32% in 2010. In the three largest municipalities the housing association share of the housing market is, however, substantially higher: about 55% in Amsterdam and Rotterdam and 37% in The Hague (see Vastgoedmonitor ABF).

Table 1 Distribution of Dutch housing stock according to tenure

Year	Social housing associations %	Private rental %	Owner-occupied %	Total stock (x 1,000)
1971	37	28	35	3,767
1990	39	17	45	5,802
2000	36	13	52	6,590
2008	32	11	57	7,029

Source: ABF Vastgoedmonitor 2010.

Target group and the distribution of social housing

The large social housing stock at the beginning of the 1990s was a legacy of the dire shortages during the post-war era and the 1980s. In the post-war era housing associations served households in most urgent need of housing. As there was a serious housing shortage social dwellings were not exclusively distributed to lower-income households. By 1990 the housing shortages were deemed by and large solved, and the idea of a social, collective housing sector with broad access lost part of its political support. The white paper 'Housing in the 1990s' (MVRM, 1989) changed the allocation task in the Housing Management Decree to 'providing housing, preferentially for lower income groups'. The white paper introduced an upper income limit, which would be annually reviewed in such a way that the 'target group' would gradually decline (MVRM, 1989). There was a risk that such measures, combined with a new government ideology to sell part of the social housing stock, would lead to concentrations of lower-income households. However, one important anti-concentration factor was the expected upward social mobility of many social tenants. Once a tenancy agreement has been fixed, an increase in household income has no consequences for the rent, nor can the tenant be evicted. This is especially the case in the largest cities, where owner-occupied dwellings are relatively scarce and affordable alternatives are thin on the ground (Van Kempen & Priemus, 2002, p. 241). Although this mismatch on the housing market is diminishing (see Van Ham *et al.*, 2006), many people in the social rented sector have outgrown the target group for social housing. The white paper 'What people want, where people live' (MVRM) further emphasises the lack of choice for upwardly mobile social tenants, as well as drawing attention to the government's desire to sell off a substantial part of the social housing stock.

Recently, another factor has entered the equation and fuelled the call for a more efficient distribution of social housing. In 2008 the European Commission asked the Dutch government to explicitly define the target group for the social housing sector. Under EU competition regulations, governments must specify the target groups which are served by semi-public organisations that receive state support. Housing associations receive hardly any building subsidies but the government still guarantees loans for the construction of new dwellings (for an extensive discussion, see Priemus and Gruis 2011). Since 1 January 2011 the Dutch government has imposed an income limit of €33,614 and ordered that housing associations allocate at least 90 per cent of their vacant social rental dwellings to households with an income below this amount. This has resulted in a dual definition of the concept of *target group*:

- Primary target group: all households eligible for housing allowance. Upper income levels of roughly €29,000 a year for multi-person households and €22,000 for single-person households.
- Secondary target group: all households with an income below €33,614 a year but above the upper income level of the primary target group.

All in all, the target group for social rented housing has been broadened by this income limit, with the result that the housing options for lower-middle and middle-income households may be seriously undermined (Priemus and Gruis 2011). However, as our analysis does not extend beyond 2010, this paper focuses on the implications of urban restructuring for the primary target group.

Urban renewal and the availability of social housing for the primary target group

Classic urban renewal largely consisted of improvements to the housing conditions in rundown pre-war inner-city neighbourhoods (see, for instance, Priemus 2008). This type of urban renewal did nothing to change the socio-economic composition of the neighbourhoods. At the beginning of the 1990s policymakers became aware of concentrations of lower-income groups in specific neighbourhoods and pointed out the undesirability of such developments. Upwardly mobile social tenants often leave because they have no attractive housing career opportunities. This results in the selective out-migration of middle-income households and the in-migration of low-income households (Kleinhans, 2004; MVRM, 1997, 2000; Van Kempen and Priemus, 2002). In our research cities, there are, in effect, three core motives for urban renewal, often mentioned in local policy documents and in interviews with housing professionals (Dol and Kleinhans, 2011):

1. To counter concentrations of lower-income households in specific neighbourhoods;
2. To improve housing conditions in post-war neighbourhoods;
3. To facilitate the housing careers of upwardly mobile households within their own neighbourhood in order to counter selective out-migration.

The relative importance of these motives varied in our research cities. For instance, the Municipality of The Hague was more preoccupied with promoting housing careers in neighbourhoods than with socio-economic concentration (Kleinhans & Van der Laan Bouma-Doff, 2008; Dol and Kleinhans, 2011).

Most restructuring programmes involve substantial demolition. Since 1997 more than 150,000 social rented dwellings have been demolished in the Netherlands. The number of newly constructed social rented units is higher, although the majority are more expensive rental or owner-occupied dwellings (Curley & Kleinhans, 2010).

Nevertheless, there has been very little research on the precise effects on the housing stock at various spatial levels. Is the extent of demolition and rebuilding indeed so massive that we can discern a decline in (the concentration of) the social housing stock, i.e. a more balanced spatial distribution of affordable social housing? Moreover, given that households from the primary target group who are relocated during demolition projects are still entitled to social rented housing, it is also open to question whether sufficient social housing will be left to meet the demand. This group still relies heavily on the social housing stock.

3. Research methods and key data

Our research involved the second- and third-largest cities in the Netherlands, i.e. Rotterdam and The Hague, and the medium-sized city of Breda (see Table 2). We used national, regional, municipal and housing association statistics to analyse and describe changes in the local housing stock and the social-housing target group since 2000. The quantitative data were supplemented with in-depth interviews with representatives of local housing associations and the municipalities.

Table 2 Characteristics of the three cities, 2000

City	Population (X 1000)	Average disposable household income (x €1000)	% of households on welfare (not unemployment benefit)	% of social housing in urban restructuring neighbourhoods
Breda	160.6	25.6	5.9%	62%
The Hague	446.6	23.4	9.4%	72%
Rotterdam	606.6	21.9	13.8%	66%

Source: Statistics Netherlands and ABF Vastgoedmonitor.

4. Results

Local policy in perspective

These three cities had clear-cut starting points at the beginning of the restructuring period in the late 1990s. In 2000 Rotterdam had a social housing stock of 57% and a primary target group of about 44% (Table 3). It had a large, affordable private rental stock, which was also open to households in the primary target group. In The Hague the total social housing stock amounted to 37% with the same percentage of households in the primary target group. Like Rotterdam, The Hague had a ‘buffer’ of affordable private rental stock, but the balance was still tight. As sitting tenants cannot be evicted to make room for home seekers in the primary target group, it is not always easy to find social housing in this municipality for poorer households. The situation in Breda was also tight: the housing association stock and the primary target group were the same size, but the number of affordable private rental units was negligible.

Table 3 Distribution of the housing stock and the primary target group at the start of the restructuring operations, 2000

City	Owner-occupied % of housing stock	Private rental % of housing stock (between brackets: % affordable stock)	Social rental % of housing stock	Primary target group % of all households
Breda	53%	11% (0%)	36%	34%
The Hague	41%	22% (50%)	37%	38%
Rotterdam	22%	21% (75%)	57%	44%
Netherlands	52%	13%	36%	31%

Source: see Dol and Kleinhans, 2011. Calculations based on Abf Vastgoedmonitor and Housing Demand Survey 2002 with own calculations

Especially in Breda, housing association officials were acutely aware of the tight balance between the primary target group and share of social rental housing. When the first restructuring operations commenced in the Heuvel neighbourhood, housing associations temporarily suspended part of their sale programmes in order to create more vacancies. At the same time, the municipality and the housing associations agreed on a so-called ‘mirror construction’: for every demolished social dwelling, a new one would be built elsewhere, preferably outside the restructuring areas. Breda still had some greenfield sites at its disposal where social housing could be realised.

Also in The Hague, both the municipality and the housing associations were aware of the relatively tight balance between the affordable rental stock (both private and social) and the primary target group (Dol and Kleinhans, 2011). However, the urge to restructure in large uniform ‘social rental districts’ was strong. One advantage in The Hague was the availability of large greenfield sites of which around 30% was designated for social housing. Meantime, the municipality approached other regional municipalities, asking them to collaborate in a regional choice-based letting model in order to house some primary target group households outside the core city (see Kleinhans & Van der Laan Bouma-Doff, 2008). Many housing associations supported this regional approach, as the mergers made them players in the regional housing market. The Municipality of The Hague kicked off with a massive restructuring operation which is still in progress, although the level of work is falling quickly due to the economic crisis.

Rotterdam could approach the actual demolition operations with less anxiety than The Hague. In 2000 the affordable rental housing stock in Rotterdam far outweighed the primary target group. In Hoogvliet in particular, a peripheral borough of the city, many social rented dwellings had become hard to let, thus increasing the

housing associations' desire to restructure. Rotterdam embarked on a mission of large-scale demolition with, at some points in time, no replacement social housing at all. Successive municipal authorities urged adjacent municipalities not to obstruct the new regional choice-based letting model and to allow more lower-income households to move in. The municipal authority even introduced the so-called Rotterdam Law (*Rotterdamwet*) to prevent an influx of low-income households into officially designated vulnerable areas in the south of the city (see Ouwehand & Van der Laan Bouma-Doff, 2007).

Demolition and the construction of new social housing

All cities have districts designated for restructuring, but social housing stock outside these districts might also be demolished. Given the deconcentration targets of the restructuring policy, the construction of new social housing is most likely to take place outside restructuring areas.

The findings in Table 4 present a very different pattern for the three cities. Breda has a small negative balance in its restructuring districts, while the balance in the other districts is positive. In total, the social housing stock even increased slightly. For every newly built social dwelling, 0.73 social dwellings were demolished, indicating a positive balance.

The picture in The Hague is very different. The scale in the restructuring districts is large, with more than 6,500 social rental dwellings demolished and almost 1,000 units being rebuilt. In the other districts the balance between demolition and the new building of social dwellings is positive. This can be mainly attributed to large-scale new construction projects on greenfield sites, where 30% of production consisted of

social dwellings. However, the total balance is negative: for every newly built social housing unit, more than two were demolished.

Table 4 Balance between demolition and construction of new social rented housing

City	Breda	The Hague	Rotterdam
	2002-2009	2000-2007	2000-2009
Restructuring districts			
Demolition	629	6,660	14,154
Newly constructed	380	934	2,971
Balance	-249	-5,726	-11,183
Other districts			
Demolition	85	1,564	5,766
Newly constructed	601	2,911	3,166
Balance	516	1,347	-2,600
Total			
Demolition	714	8,224	19,920
Newly constructed	981	3,845	6,137
Balance	267	-4,379	-13,783
Demolition-new construction ratio	0.73	2.14	3.25

Sources: Municipalities of Breda and Rotterdam; The Hague: Vastgoedmonitor ABF.

Demolition in Rotterdam occurred on an even grander scale. Between 2000 and 2009 more than 14,000 social rental dwellings were demolished in the restructuring districts while almost 3,000 were built as replacements. Interestingly, the demolition-new construction ratio in the non-restructuring districts is also negative. Unlike The Hague,

Rotterdam did not have large, new greenfield sites at hand where social dwellings could be built. During this era one city council even refused to build replacement social dwellings. The promise of (relatively small) subsidies from the central government persuaded the Municipality of Rotterdam to designate 30% of the (scarce) greenfield sites for social housing.

A breach in the concentration of social rental housing?

Our first question, whether urban restructuring leads to substantially different percentages of social housing, can be answered positively to some extent. The restructuring districts all experienced a decline in the share of social rental housing (see Table 5), which was accompanied by an increase in the share of owner-occupation. That said, social housing still accounts for a relatively high share of the housing in the restructuring districts. Differences with non-restructuring districts are particularly significant in Breda and The Hague. In the non-restructuring districts, the share of social housing has remained unchanged (see Dol and Kleinhaus, 2011). It may also be noted that, in relative terms, the decline of the social housing sector was greatest in the restructuring districts in Rotterdam and The Hague, while the impact in Breda was limited. To be fair, the operations in Breda commenced in 2003 and only gained momentum from 2005. The economic crisis has caused stagnation in Breda: housing associations are reluctant to risk building new owner-occupied dwellings under the current conditions. The same goes for The Hague and Rotterdam, although a substantial part of the operations is already complete in these cities.

Table 5 Distribution of tenure in the restructuring districts, 2000 and 2008/2009

Tenure	Owner-occupied	Private rental	Social rental
Breda			
Restructuring districts 2000	29%	9%	62%
Restructuring districts 2008	36%	7%	58%
Non-restructuring districts 2008	65%	8%	27%
The Hague			
Restructuring districts 2003*	23%	5%	72%
Restructuring districts 2009	31%	6%	63%
Non-restructuring districts 2009	49%	23%	28%
Rotterdam			
Restructuring districts 2000	16%	18%	66%
Restructuring districts 2008	28%	12%	59%
Non-restructuring districts 2008	38%	15%	47%

***2003 after a municipal boundary change**

Sufficient social housing for the primary target group?

Table 6 summarises the information we need to answer our second question: to what extent does the dwindling supply of social rented housing match the demand in the target group? This is partly an academic exercise: if the affordable rental housing stock (i.e. social plus private) equates to the number of households in the primary target group, the situation is already very tight: we need to bear in mind that part of the affordable rental stock is inhabited by tenants with middle or higher incomes. However, we also need to mention that part of the target group lives in an owner occupied dwelling.

In Breda the affordable rental housing stock has barely changed in size and is, in theory, only just capable of accommodating the primary target group (Table 6). Due to favourable developments in local income the percentage of households in the primary target group has declined somewhat since 2000.

In The Hague the primary target group was more or less the same size as in 2000. In theory it could be accommodated by the affordable rental stock, but the balance was getting tighter. The decline in the social rental sector had been accompanied by a substantial decline in the affordable private rental sector. It is hard for the municipality to control developments in the private rental sector, even though it relies on it to some extent for housing the primary target group.

The most relaxed starting situation was in Rotterdam, where the social rental stock was more than sufficient in 2000. On top of this, Rotterdam had around 44,000 affordable private rental dwellings. All in all, the restructuring operations in Rotterdam had been massive, reducing the social housing stock by nearly 20,000 dwellings. However, we foresee no problems as the social housing stock still exceeds the primary

The information in Table 6 shows the situation at municipality level. However, The Hague and Rotterdam both participate in a regional choice-based letting system. Further analysis (not shown here) shows a decline in social housing stock at regional level as well, but there is still enough to accommodate the primary target group (Dol and Kleinhans, 2011).

Table 6 Housing association stock and target group in three municipalities and in the Netherlands in general, 2000 and 2008/2009

	Breda	Den Haag	Rotterdam	Netherlands
2000				
Housing association %	33%*	37%	57%	36%
Housing association dwellings	23,400	83,100	160,700	2,352,000
Estimation affordable private rental dwellings	n/a	33,000	43,600	
<i>Estimation total affordable rental dwellings</i>	<i>23,400</i>	<i>116,100</i>	<i>204,300</i>	
Primary Target Group	34%	38%	44%	31%
<i>Primary target group abs.</i>	<i>24,000</i>	<i>85,700</i>	<i>124,800</i>	
2008/2009				
Housing association %	31%	34%	50%	32%
Housing association dwellings	23,500	79,700	141,600	2,251,000
Estimation affordable private rental dwellings	n.a.	23,000	40,900	
<i>Estimation total affordable rental dwellings</i>	<i>23,500</i>	<i>102,700</i>	<i>182,500</i>	
Primary Target Group	28%	37%	41%	28%
<i>Primary target group abs.</i>	<i>21,200</i>	<i>86,000</i>	<i>118,300</i>	
Primary + Secondary Target Group	49%	61%	63%	50%

*This number is a bit lower than in table 3. Table 3 includes some 'other' special types like old age homes. Sources: MVRM/SYSWOV, Municipalities Breda, The Hague and Rotterdam.

Sources estimation target groups: Housing Demand Surveys 2002 and 2006.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

The housing stock in many 1950/1960s urban neighbourhoods in the Netherlands has been singled out for a radical restructuring programme. Since 1997 one of the aims of the national urban restructuring policy has been to enhance variation in residential environments and to improve the attractiveness and reputation of the housing stock. Other important aims are to offer more housing career opportunities and to combat the selective migration of middle-class and higher-income households from the city (MVRM, 1997, 2000). Demolition and the construction of more expensive rental or owner-occupied housing are the key instruments.

Almost 150,000 social rented dwellings have been demolished since 1997. Despite the growing concern that continued restructuring may lead to a shortage of social rented housing for the primary target group, hardly any research had been carried out in this domain. This paper aimed to bridge this gap through a quantitative analysis of the developments in social rented housing in the cities of Rotterdam, The Hague, and Breda.

The results indicate that the percentage of social rented housing is still high in most restructuring neighbourhoods, although demolition has caused quite dramatic reductions in the actual *number* of social rented dwellings. In all cities social housing still accounts for approximately 60 per cent of the dwellings in many restructuring districts. The percentage of social housing in non-restructuring districts has remained roughly the same. Hence, at municipality level, the differences between the percentage of social housing in restructuring and non-restructuring districts have narrowed. More importantly, urban restructuring has not resulted in concentrations of social housing in other, non-restructuring neighbourhoods in any of the cities (Dol and Kleinhans, 2011).

The crucial question is: to what extent do the dwindling supplies of social housing match changes in the (quantitative) demand in the primary target group? In The Hague there was enough affordable housing stock in 2000, while in Breda the primary target group and the affordable dwelling stock were equally matched. After a decade of restructuring, the affordable rental stock in Breda was still in balance thanks to ‘mirrored construction’: for every demolished social rental dwelling, a new one was built in another district. Since 2000 The Hague has seen a strong decline in the social rental stock and the affordable private rental stock; mostly due to sales in the case of the latter. However, the demolition of social rental housing was partly compensated by new-builds on large greenfield sites on the edge of the city. Overall, restructuring has led to a much tighter balance between affordable rental housing and the primary target group in both Breda and The Hague. These cities have kept a close eye on the development of the social housing stock and will continue to do so as restructuring is set to intensify in Breda and is still ongoing in The Hague. The Hague has entered regional agreements with adjacent municipalities to secure sufficient affordable housing through a regional choice-based letting system. Finally, the situation in Rotterdam was much more relaxed in 2000, with the affordable social housing stock largely outstripping the primary target group. Despite the vast demolition efforts, Rotterdam still has sufficient affordable housing for lower-income households thanks to a large, affordable private rental stock.

Now we turn to the policy implications. When there is a tight balance between the target group and the social housing stock, further restructuring can lead to shortages of affordable dwellings and (even) longer waiting lists for social housing. Breda and The Hague are currently in danger of ‘going a step too far’ in the battle against concentration, all the more so, given that Breda expects an intensification of

restructuring in the near future (Dol and Kleinhans, 2011). The only way to maintain sufficient supply of social housing would be to introduce a strictly enforced ‘mirrored construction’ for every demolished social rental unit. The tight balance will also intensify the calls for efficient distribution of the social housing stock. This might involve political pressure to set lower income levels for the primary target group and/or attempts to encourage tenants with ‘too high an income’ to move out of the social rented sector. Political steps are being taken in both Breda and The Hague to achieve exactly this. Yet, the current political discussion is focusing on the new income limit for access to social rented housing. This step has actually broadened the definition of the target group and may seriously hamper the housing opportunities of lower-middle and middle-income households instead of low-income households (Priemus & Gruis, 2011). Since 1 January 2011 the Dutch government has imposed an income limit of €33,614 and ordered housing associations to allocate at least 90 per cent of their vacant social rental dwellings to households with incomes below this limit. In the long run, this measure may lead to concentrations of low-income households in the social rented sector. We consider these issues of prime importance for further research. Furthermore, relocated households are offered another comparable social rental dwelling: this is both sensible and gains support for restructuring operations. This means that these households also exert some pressure on the diminishing social rental stock. The possible impact of this effect is currently investigated as a part of another project.

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