1. Introduction

1.1 Motivation

**Political agreement 2018-2022 of Municipality of Midden Groningen (northeast of the Netherlands):**

We are firmly committed to self-reliant and liveable villages and hamlets. In close collaboration with residents and organisations of course. The new municipality of Midden Groningen will be a collection of communities in which residents are jointly responsible for the liveability. The municipality and residents are increasingly becoming equal partners.

**Political agreement 2018-2022 of Municipality of Bronckhorst (east of the Netherlands):**

We see an active and responsible society that is well able to take initiatives. We stand for shared responsibility, partnership and reciprocity by 1. connecting as a municipality to society in a way and in a time that is supportive to civic initiatives, and 2. stimulating and challenging society to take responsibility.

These are just two random passages from political agreements of municipalities in the Netherlands that show that the local governments in question search to redefine roles and responsibilities for their citizens and themselves. They also illustrate the prevailing discourse that citizens can fill in the gaps that result from public budget cuts in more effective and efficient ways than governments. High levels of civic self-reliance in addressing local issues are moreover believed to contribute to civic empowerment and local social cohesion through enhanced collaboration (Gieling and Haartsen, 2017; De Haan et al., 2017). A similar development can be witnessed in other Western European countries, where local governments promote innovative governance forms with citizens (Silva & Bucek, 2014). In the UK, for example, the ‘Big Society’ agenda has experimented with shifts of decision-making about social and financial issues to local communities since 2010 (Bailey, 2012; Healey, 2015; Hobson et al., 2019).
Particularly in the more peripheral rural areas of the Netherlands, local governments have been searching for how to give their citizens a more prominent role in solving liveability (Leefbaarheid\(^2\) in Dutch) issues in their communities. The functioning of such novel forms of governance with high levels of civic self-reliance in the context of peripheral depopulating rural areas are at the core of this thesis.

In the last decades, ongoing depopulation and ageing have been affecting the liveability of many of the smaller villages in the more peripheral rural municipalities in the Netherlands — a development which according to recent population forecasts is not going to cease soon (Groenemeijer et al., 2018). Population decline has affected the cost-effectiveness of municipal services and facilities and led to closures of facilities and services in the smaller villages and to concentration in so-called central towns. This has been the case with, among others, health-care services, schools, libraries and public transport (Korsten & Goedvolk, 2008; Hospel & Reverda, 2012; Bock, 2019). Particularly after the financial crisis of 2008, and in combination with a general climate of austerity and structural public budget cuts, the municipalities concerned started to feel the urge to look for alternative solutions to ensure the liveability of their villages. In 2009, this was reflected in the broad inter-governmental formal agreement ‘Inter-governmental Action Plan Population Decline’ (Ministerie BZK et al., 2009) in which new governance roles were sought for both residents and municipalities in addressing local liveability issues. Since then, many local policies have made a call for active civic engagement to ensure the liveability of the villages. In the resulting practices, citizens are encouraged, for example, to adopt the maintenance of green spaces and community centres. New possibilities are also explored, such as the ‘right to challenge’; a strategy that has come over from the UK, which gives citizens the chance to challenge their local governments to do public tasks more cheaply and invest the surpluses in the community. Since 2013, the active engagement of citizens has been further enhanced when the Dutch cabinet published the broadly discussed and influential white-paper (The Do-Democracy). At its core is the avocation of citizen self-reliance, active citizenship and societal and governmental

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\(^2\)Leefbaarheid is a concept which is commonly used in the Dutch language and refers to the different individual needs and desires that villages must meet to be considered socially and physically liveable (Liedelmeijer and Van Kamp, 2003; Gieling & Haartsen, 2017).
participation (Ministerie BZK, 2013). Due to the long-term nature of depopulation, ageing, and public budget cuts, many local governments have considered to date to give their residents more room for local initiatives and shift responsibility and decision-making power to them to address local liveability issues by themselves.

Recent studies demonstrate that even when local governments aim to retreat and citizens step in, some government involvement is inevitable to warrant the effectiveness and success of novel governance forms with high levels of citizen self-reliance (Healey, 2015; Edelenbos et al., 2018). This thesis focuses on such new forms of governance initiatives in which both citizens and governments engage. Both in academic debate and policy arenas, little is still known about the dynamics, potentials, and limitations of such initiatives in the particular context of rural depopulation. Yet, there is much to be learnt about, for example, the results that residents of the smaller villages and local governments can achieve through their interactions and how such novel forms of collaboration develop over time. In addition, as they concern mere collaborations on a voluntary basis, it can be questioned whether residents of the more remote areas want to engage in such initiatives at all and, if not, what their motives are for not engaging. Furthermore, there is no knowledge yet about how such initiatives are experienced and appreciated within the villages where they take place. After all, it is for the sake of the local community that the efforts concerned are made. From a policy point of view, it may be assumed it is a good thing that residents obtain a more firm position in local decision-making and that they are more knowledgeable and effective in addressing local issues. The question is whether such arguments apply and can be considered legitimate. It is of both societal and scientific relevance to get a grasp on these questions and the interaction between them. The central aim of this thesis, therefore, is to obtain deeper insights in the dynamics, potentials and limitations of novel forms of collaboration between governments and citizens in depopulating rural areas in terms of both their contribution to local liveability and their achievement of a higher level of civic self-reliance. This thesis unravels the processes and mechanisms of such governance forms by the use of elements of diverse theories. In doing so, it considers the perspectives of civic leaders and policymakers involved and the perspective of residents whose community liveability it concerns.
1.2 Research questions

This thesis addresses the following main research question:

*How can novel forms of governance with high levels of civic self-reliance be understood from the perspectives of involved residents, local governments and the supposed beneficiaries, and what are the dynamics, potentials, and limitations that may come to the fore?*

To generate an overall view at the initiative level from the perspectives of both involved civic leaders and policymakers of how such novel governance forms may develop, sub-RQ1 is formulated as follows: *How do experimental governance arrangements between local governments and residents evolve in time?* To address this question, a comparison is made between three initiatives through exploring the related governance dynamics over time, the realisation of social and material outcomes and the extent to which novel modes of governance were institutionalised within the working modes and policies of local government. Furthermore, until today, little is known about how a community’s self-governance capacity may be built, weakened and strengthened in time through changes in an initiative’s organisational structure and interaction processes. Hence, sub-RQ2 is formulated as follows: *How can the self-governance capacity of an innovative and long-term community initiative develop in time?* At the initiative level, it is explored how the interaction between the organisational structure and interaction processes affect the self-governance capacity in time, and what roles the civic core actors, the broader community and the relevant public authorities play in the related developments. This thesis also examines how the initiative’s main successes and setbacks have been of influence on its self-governance capacity in time.

From the perspective of community members, so far hardly any attention has been paid to how such community-focused initiatives are perceived by the community involved. This is addressed in sub-RQ3, which is formulated as follows: *How do residents evaluate initiatives led by citizens that aim to improve the liveability of their community?* In this context, it is examined how
residents evaluate a comprehensive and long-term self-governance initiative in terms of its tangible and social outputs and newly achieved governance form.

Additionally, this thesis examines the reasons why residents may not engage in local liveability initiatives. This is of relevance for understanding to what extent it is legitimate and realistic that local governments encourage higher levels of civic responsibility in the public space. Although in recent literature such civic non-engagement has been broadly discussed, there are no insights yet into the motivations and abilities of residents of depopulating rural areas that withhold them from engaging. Sub-RQ4 is therefore formulated as follows: How can it be explained that some residents do not engage in local initiatives that intend to improve the liveability of their community?

1.3 Theory

1.3.1 Context of rural depopulation

Whilst at the national level the population of the Netherlands is growing, an increasing divide can be noted between urban and rural areas. Whereas most cities will grow quickly between 2018 and 2030, many rural areas at the borders of the country will continue to experience a decline in population. The extent of the decline is not the same everywhere; in most of these areas, the decline is estimated to be between 2.5-5%, whereas in some areas it is expected to reach even 20% (see Figure 1).

According to the last predictions, depopulation will occur in 30% of the municipalities in 2040 (Groenemeijer et al., 2018). Due to the outmigration of residents and the loss of services and facilities, it is expected that local liveability in many places will remain a point of tension (Ministerie BZK, 2018). This thesis focuses on novel governance forms, with high levels of civic self-reliance in this particular context, to obtain a deeper understanding of their dynamics, potentials, and limitations as a solution for ensuring local liveability.
1.3.2 Novel governance forms with high levels of civic self-reliance

Following Sørensen and Triantafillou (2009), this thesis sees novel governance forms with high levels of civic self-reliance as complex arrangements in which citizens and local governments, together with other possible stakeholders, carry out governance tasks in the public space. The shared discourse of civic self-governance is that high levels of civic self-reliance are more democratic, effective and efficient in achieving public good. The involved local governments are regarded as articulating and managing the institutional settings and conditions that support the shift of responsibilities and decision-making power and enhance civic self-governance capacities. The examined governance forms can be initiated bottom-up by citizens, in collaboration with local governments (and other stakeholders), or under the direction of local governments. The starting point of this thesis is that such governance forms always take place in particular local social settings and conditions that support the governance forms.
contexts and that their interactions and dynamics are power-and value-laden. These forms, however, are not isolated from other geopolitical scales.

This thesis takes a new approach in that it examines the same phenomenon from different levels of analysis and perspectives and uses elements of various theories to obtain a more complete picture of its multiple facets.

Firstly, focusing on the level of initiatives (see Figure 2), this thesis examines how governance initiatives with a high extent of civic self-reliance may develop over time. In doing so, their relation to the local governments and communities concerned is also included.

The perspectives of both involved civic leaders and policymakers are taken into account to see how different innovative governance forms between residents and local governments may evolve (sub-RQ-1). In doing so, this thesis uses the lens of Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) (Van Assche et al., 2014; Beunen et al., 2015). Based on the government participation ladder of the Dutch Council for Public Governance (ROB, 2012), several core elements and factors of EGT are examined. This way, the cultural and historical contexts of both communities and local governments are studied to obtain insight into the path dependencies that influenced the novel governance forms. In addition, factors that marked local governance pathways are considered,
such as the locally prevailing formal and informal rules of the game (institutions), the relations between civic and governmental actors and institutions and their division of power and knowledge. Furthermore, this thesis looks into the concept of goal dependence, i.e. the influence of future visions on recent decision-making, actions, and institutions. It is examined how these elements in their interdependency affect the direction of governance change (for a more detailed theoretical framework, see Chapter 2).

This thesis then explores how the self-governance capacity of an innovative and long-term community initiative may develop concerning its ability to achieve its goals (sub-RQ2). In doing so, elements of Kooiman’s theory of governance (2003) are used in combination with key conditions of self-steering capacity found in recent literature. The evolving structural level of interactions is explored by looking into the changes of such an initiative’s organisation model and formal and informal regulations and agreements. The intentional level of interactions is examined by considering the governance process of the initiative and the actions and interactions between the involved residents, including the broader community and the public authorities. In doing so, this thesis specifically dives into the division of decision-making power and how decisions are communicated and accounted for internally, and towards both the community and public authorities. Furthermore, it explores how the successful realisation of goals and coping with setbacks influences the key conditions of self-governance capacity (for a more detailed theoretical framework, see Chapter 3).

Secondly, focusing on the level of individual residents (see Figure 3), this thesis examines to what extent and how residents may be committed to governance initiatives with high levels of civic self-reliance that aim to contribute to the community liveability. As there were no frameworks in literature yet that address these issues from the perspective of residents, two new conceptual frameworks are composed on the basis of components identified in the literature. Sociodemographic characteristics of the residents are also examined.
This thesis uses elements of social innovation theories to obtain insights into residents’ basic ideas and evaluations of an innovative governance initiative in their community (sub-RQ3). In the process dimension, it is explored how increased collaborations and new forms of governance were experienced and if they contributed to a positive evaluation. In the outcome dimension, it is examined if and to what extent new social relations within the village and the successful achievement of tangible outputs were of influence on the residents’ evaluation (for a more detailed theoretical framework, see Chapter 4).

Subsequently, this thesis examines to what extent some residents do not engage in initiatives that address the liveability of their community and why (sub-RQ-4). The emphasis is on elderly residents (45+ years) because it is expected that civic engagement will increasingly depend on them; they are in the majority in depopulating rural areas and have more time available due to their stage in life (Munoz et al. 2014; Kooiman et al., 2016; Ruth and Franklin 2014). A division is made between explanatory motivations and lacking abilities. This thesis explores the following factors for the motivation of non-engagement: evaluations of the local liveability; views on the local government’s responsibility for maintaining liveability; the extent of agreement with existing civic initiatives; possible other priorities, and; the sense of affective and social belonging to the community. For the lacking ability of residents, their expected influence, lack of confidence
in their capacity and personal characteristics are explored, such as age and health. It is also checked if residents did not wish to engage without having any particular reason (for a more detailed theoretical framework, see Chapter 5).

1.4 Methods and data

This thesis explores different aspects of novel governance forms with high levels of civic self-reliance which aim to contribute to the liveability of Dutch depopulating rural communities. The validity is optimised by the use of mixed methods and cross-case analyses in addressing the main research question. Firstly, different cases are examined in different provinces, municipalities, and communities in the Netherlands. Secondly, this thesis zooms in on various aspects of such novel governance forms from meso- to microanalysis levels. Thirdly, in all four studies, different theoretical approaches are applied. Lastly, both qualitative and quantitative methods are used.

For addressing sub-RQ1, three qualitative case studies were conducted to compare the long-term development of three initiatives across the Netherlands: the villages of Beltrum (Municipality of Berkelland, Province of Gelderland), Ee (Municipality of Dongeradeel, Province of Fryslân) and Nieuw-Dordrecht (Municipality of Emmen, Province of Drenthe). The main data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with involved civic and governmental key persons and relevant plans and policy sources. A qualitative method was applied in which the transcribed interviews and documents are analysed through coding (more detailed information can be found in Chapter 2).

For addressing sub-RQ2, a qualitative in-depth case study was conducted regarding the comprehensive and long-term initiative ‘Project Ulrum 2034’ (Municipality De Marne, Province of Groningen). Its self-governance capacity dynamics were examined from the inside through qualitative participatory observations of the project’s meetings and activities during the period 2015-2018 and document analysis over the period 2010-2018. By coding and analysing the data, it was reconstructed how the projects’ self-governance capacity developed in time (more detailed information can be found in Chapter 3).
To address sub-RQ3, the same initiative was explored from the perspective of community members, making use of mixed methods research. Information was obtained through a door-to-door distributed survey in the residential area of the village of Ulrum (response rate of 47.5%; N=291), supplemented with information from within the initiative that is obtained through the qualitative non-participatory observations as previously mentioned. Multivariate statistical analysis was applied to examine residents’ evaluation of the initiative at the community level (more detailed information can be found in Chapter 4).

Quantitative methods were applied to address sub-RQ4, which examines non-engagement in local liveability initiatives at the individual level of middle-aged and elderly residents (45+ years) within the province of Fryslân. The data was collected via several online surveys by the Frisian Institute for Social Research (FSP, N=1185). By using logistic statistical analyses, the extent of recent and future non-engagement and the reasons for this were explored (more detailed information can be found in Chapter 5).

1.5 Outline

Chapters 2-5 form the core of this thesis. Each chapter addresses one research question (RQ1-RQ4) to examine the issues and dynamics of novel forms of governance with citizens that aim to contribute to local liveability and achieve higher levels of civic self-reliance in doing so.

In Chapter 2, which addresses sub-RQ1, the emphasis is on three experimental governance arrangements between citizens and local governments which aspired to realise shifts in responsibilities and decision-making power to citizens. Through the lens of Evolutionary Governance Theory, the focus is on how decision-making roles change while these arrangements unfold, and how the three local governments institutionalise these changes over time. The analysis reveals that certain shifts in decision-making roles with more responsibility for citizens seem to be more stable than others. It also demonstrates that both citizens and local governments involved may unexpectedly return to more traditional modes of governance in which local governments have more decision-making power. Within communities, particularly the level of social cohesion and commitment seems to have an important influence on the direction of the governance
pathway. Within local governments, the type of organisation structure, political willingness and the level of experiences with new governance modes (level of formal and informal institutionalisation) all play a significant role. Individual competences of those involved also seem relevant.

In Chapters 3 and 4, which address sub-RQ2 and sub-RQ3 respectively, the emphasis is on the experimental comprehensive and long-term community initiative ‘Project Ulrum 2034’. On the basis of Kooiman’s theory of governance and in combination with the key conditions of community self-governance capacities identified in recent studies, Chapter 3 examines how the self-steering capacity of this initiative developed at the community level. In-depth insights are obtained about the dependence on governmental support, the fragility of the continuity of community self-governance, and the dynamicity, fluctuations, and non-linearity of self-steering capacities in time. It appears that the degree of involvement of public authorities, the availability of public money, and the dependence of citizens on this support, can have a decisive influence on changes within the organisation of such initiatives and their ambitions. In addition, tensions come to light between 1. local autonomy and the dependence on professional support, and; 2. broader community engagement and accountability related to obtained public funding which led to the formalisation of the initiative’s organisation and the centralisation of tasks. In Chapter 4, the same initiative is examined while focusing on the perspective of the community members. Elements of social innovation theory are used to analyse how the initiative is evaluated. It is found that most residents are positive about the outputs of the initiative and its contribution to local liveability. The novel governance form is also evaluated positively, but only when this went hand in hand with a positive evaluation of the tangible outputs. It also turns out that a substantial group knows very little about the initiative and that low-income groups, in particular, lack the interest to become engaged.

In chapter 5, which addresses RQ4, the emphasis is on the specific motivations and abilities identified in recent studies that explain the non-engagement of ageing residents (45+ years). The focus is on residents of depopulating rural areas in the province of Fryslân (Northern Netherlands) who are also compared to those in other rural and urban areas. It is found that the majority of the ageing residents did not engage in the past two years, and one-third of this group has no intention
to do so in the future either. The main reasons for recent non-engagement that come to light are that the respondents have other priorities, do not feel capable to engage or feel that the responsibility for local liveability belongs to the local government. Furthermore, it appears that not having the intention to engage in the future is, above all, explained by a general unwillingness to do so.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the conclusions of each chapter of this thesis which are then combined in an overall conclusion.
1.6 References


2. An evolutionary perspective on experimental local governance arrangements with local governments and residents in Dutch rural areas of depopulation

Abstract

Population decline, welfare state reforms and austerity measures pressurise the liveability of rural areas in the Netherlands and call upon local governments and communities to adapt and renew their mode of governance. This paper reports on three Dutch experimental governance arrangements which are analysed through the lens of Evolutionary Governance Theory. The study focuses on how decision making roles change while these arrangements unfold and how the three municipalities institutionalise these changes in the course of time. The study produces three main conclusions. First, the readiness and preparedness of local governments to shift decision making roles with citizens proved to be of main influence on governance change. Second, local residents’ commitment importantly affected the progress of the experiments, while social cohesion and tangible outputs strongly influenced the extent and continuity of such commitment. Third, although the arrangements took place in the same period of time and above mentioned context, the level of institutionalisation of shifting roles between government and residents differed among the cases. Certain pathways of evolving decision making roles seem to be more stable than others. It is in this area that the extent of both formal and informal institutionalisation seems to play an important role.

2.1 Introduction

At present, 25% of European rural areas are facing structural population decline (Cloet, 2003; Reher, 2007; Hospers & Reverda, 2012). In the Netherlands this is the case for about one-third of the municipalities of which most are located in the peripheral rural areas (Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, 2010; Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). This places pressure on the liveability of these communities in a variety of ways, including an increasing number of vacant houses and degrading neighbourhoods, disappearing services and facilities and decreasing community finances.