6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Ongoing depopulation and ageing have affected the liveability of many of the smaller villages in the more peripheral rural municipalities of the Netherlands, a development which according to recent population forecasts is not going to cease soon. Combined with a general climate of austerity and structural public budget cuts, this has led to the search of both communities and local governments for solutions in which citizens take and obtain more responsibilities and high levels of local autonomy in dealing with local liveability challenges. This thesis explores novel forms of governance in this context.

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

This question is addressed through four steps of research. Chapter 2 discussed three experimental governance arrangements which aspired to shift responsibilities and decision-making power from local governments to citizens, through the lens of Evolutionary Governance Theory. Chapters 3 examined the dynamics of the self-steering capacity of the long-term community initiative ‘Project Ulrum 2034’ in time. Elements of Kooiman’s theory of governance were applied in combination with conceptualisations of the key conditions promoting community self-governance capacities identified in recent studies. Chapter 4 explored how this same initiative was evaluated by community members and provides an explanation of their evaluation. Elements of social innovation theory are used for this. Chapter 5 focused on the reasons for non-engagement in community-focused initiatives of ageing residents (45 + years old) of depopulating rural areas in the Province of Fryslân (Northern Netherlands). Specific motivations and abilities identified in recent studies were examined while comparing residents of rural and urban areas.

In the next section (6.2) the main research results of the four subquestions are presented. Section 6.3 discusses the significance of the results concerning governance dynamics and the related potentials and limitations. Section 6.4. presents the final concluding remarks.
6.2 Main results

In Chapter 2, the aim was to obtain a deeper understanding of how innovative governance forms with citizens in the lead may evolve in time and how decision-making roles may be rearranged from the perspective of both involved civic leaders and policymakers. Therefore, the following subquestion (sub-RQ1) was addressed: *How do experimental governance arrangements between local governments and residents evolve in time?* Three qualitative case studies looked into initiatives across the Netherlands in which both residents and local governments experimented with novel forms of collaborations and in which residents obtained a more prominent role in decision-making concerning local liveability issues. By the use of Evolutionary Governance Theory (Van Assche et al., 2014; Beunen et al., 2015), the dynamics around the role shifts in decision-making and formal institutionalisation of novel governance modes by the local governments were explored. In this context, both the specific contexts of the villages and the involved local governments were considered.

In the current political climate, it is often assumed that the shift towards governance with citizens in the lead is a continuing process which in the end will produce higher levels of citizens self-reliance. This study revealed, instead, that governance modes enfold in a non-linear fashion; governance evolution may proceed in various directions with the chance of directions turning even quite drastically and unexpectedly to a more prominent and traditional role for local governments in decision-making. The results demonstrated that the shift of decision-making roles evolved along a specific pathway in each case, with differences in the extent and way in which responsibilities and decisive control were distributed and shared among residents and local governments. Each pathway developed within a unique governance context and was characterised by continuous shifts in the actors involved and, therefore, in their capacities, knowledge, and degree of control. This affected citizen-government interactions and, as such, governance transformation. The Beltrum case started as a bottom-up citizen initiative that depended on governmental support during a few years after which it regained autonomy. In the Ee case, the initiative was set up under the direction of the local government, whilst at the same time aiming at joint decision-making with residents. In time, however, the local government withdrew to the position of facilitator who supported any initiative of involved residents. The Nieuw-Dordrecht case began as a joint initiative of residents,
the local government and other institutional partners in which the involved parties searched to establish an autonomous community enterprise. However, this failed due to lack of experience among both the community and the local government, as a result of which the residents decided to give up their ambition of autonomy and instead return to their prior position of advising the government.

Moreover, the results demonstrated that the level to which role shifts were institutionalised within the local governments differed across the cases. In the Beltrum case, the institutional change was the most stable, which may be explained by the fact that change was considered as urgently needed and already prepared and welcomed in the formal and informal context prior to this particular initiative. The successful experiences with this initiative reinforced further institutionalisation too. In the other two cases, the governance contexts were far less prepared for deliberations between local governments and residents. Nevertheless, in the Ee case, the positive experiences contributed to significant formal institutional change. In the Nieuw-Dordrecht case, the disappointing experiences at the initiative level together with the general political reticence slowed down and hampered such change. For both local governments and residents, it is still open in which direction both formal and informal institutionalisation will develop shortly.

Although each initiative had a unique evolutionary pathway, this study also demonstrated that two main factors enhanced and obstructed the evolution towards higher levels of autonomy. Firstly, the evolution depended for a large part on the readiness and preparedness of local governments to share decision-making power with citizens as reflected in the accessibility for citizens (and adjustments to this) of the municipal organisational structure and working routines, (the stability or changeability of) the political will, and the preparedness and level of relevant skills of the civil servants and governors involved. It turned out that effective communication and cooperation between residents and municipalities are often troubled due to the structure of the municipal organisation in departments with separate tasks and responsibilities. Internal differences and inconsistencies may cause tensions regarding innovative and often more integral practices. It, therefore, seems important that local governments gradually institutionalise new governance modes in their policies and working routines. In this way, they can build up experience while ensuring that citizens have easier access to their organisation and the necessary procedures.
Furthermore, the findings suggest that the continuity of role shifts may be uncertain if it mainly depends on the enthusiasm of individual civil servants and governors. Secondly, the commitment of the residents was of crucial influence on the progress of the experiments; the extent and continuity of this commitment were strongly influenced by the level of social cohesion within the local community and by the initiatives’ success in terms of tangible outputs achieved.

Chapter 3 aimed to address the current gap in knowledge about how changes in the organisational structure of community-focused initiatives interact with changes in their collaborative interactions and how it influences their self-governance capacity. The roles of the core actors, the broader community and the relevant public authorities were taken into consideration with the intention to unravel how citizen self-governance capacities are built, strengthened or weakened in time. This is done through a qualitative case study of the long-term community initiative ‘Project Ulrum 2034’ – of which two levels of governance were explored: the structural and the intentional level of interactions (Kooiman, 2003). It was examined how these interactions jointly and interdependently influenced the initiatives’ self-governance capacity and its ability to achieve its goals. The following subquestion (sub-RQ2) was then addressed: How may the self-governance capacity of an innovative and long-term community initiative develop in time?

This study demonstrated 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 structure and governance process of such initiatives. The interplay of the structural and intentional level of interactions importantly affects if and how key conditions of self-steering capacity are being satisfied. The results revealed that self-steering capacities fluctuate in time, are dynamic and develop in a non-linear way. Diverging results were achieved over time concerning the goals and self-governance ambitions defined at the level of the initiative as a whole and its subprojects. Furthermore, the results showed that voluntary engagement was temporary, except for some activities when of direct interest to those involved. The continuity of community self-governance appeared to be fragile due to the dependency on external funding, volunteering and the community’s resourcefulness in terms of social and cultural capital.
This study also demonstrated that the substantial practical and financial support of the local and regional government allowed for the development of multiple subprojects and was crucial for the initiative’s successful realisation of many tangible outputs. It contributed to the high self-governance capacity of the small leading group of residents: it strengthened their ‘sense of mission’, skills and leadership qualities, provided them with an effective business model which was supported by the community and ensured the representativeness and legitimacy of the definition and realisation of goals. At the same time, a tension between local autonomy and professional support came to the fore with increasing dependence on professional support corrod ing the aspired community autonomy and self-governance capacity. This dependence was nurtured by the substantial government subsidy which increased the complexity of the project and its management and resulted in the need to develop adequate accountability mechanisms to both the community and the public authorities. The tension between autonomy and increasing dependence was also reflected in the pressure to match the initiative’s goals to the policy agenda in order to ensure the political legitimacy of the granted public funding.

An additional, second tension concerned the ambition of broad community engagement and the need for accountability related to the public funding obtained. The latter required a formalisation of the initiative’s organisation and resulted in the centralisation of tasks. This, however, contradicted the intention to build local autonomy upon broad community engagement. The rigidity of the new ‘rules of the game’ that came along with the formal governance arrangement hampered the flexibility of the initiative and its ability to include community members with new ideas. In addition, the management of governmentally funded activities was very complex and time-consuming and fostered a more inward orientation. In contrast to the intentions, the lack of engagement with the broader community reflected a low self-governance capacity.

Altogether this study came to the paradoxical conclusions that novel and tailor-made forms of intensive government engagement seem crucial to support communities’ self-steering capacity to ensure rural liveability and that communities are unlikely to have the self-governance capacity to provide a reliable and enduring solution for government retreatment from public services
themselves. Government engagement then may, however, affect the (sense of) autonomy at the initiative and the community level due to the obligations that may come along with it.

In Chapter 4, the aim was to obtain deeper insights into how novel governance forms with citizens in the lead are experienced by the community members to whose community liveability they are supposed to contribute. In this study, the same initiative as in Chapter 3 – ‘Project Ulrum 2034’ - was examined but this time from a civic perspective, as this has hardly ever received attention both in policy arenas and in academic debate. This was addressed by the following subquestion (RQ3): How do residents of depopulating rural areas evaluate initiatives led by citizens that aim to improve the liveability of their community? A quantitative study at the village level explored the residents’ basic ideas and evaluations of the initiative in terms of the governance process and the social and tangible outputs. Conceptually, this part of the research was based on social innovation theory as described by Moulaert (2009; 2010), Bock (2016) and (Neumeier, 2017).

First, this study demonstrated that at the community level residents were positive about such an initiative and its contribution to local liveability. Above all, this was explained by tangible outputs. Furthermore, the perception that the level of collaboration within the village increased and the appreciation of the novel forms of collaboration with the local government proved important for a positive evaluation, but only when the realised tangible outputs were valued positively. However, it also demonstrated that substantial groups may know very little about such initiatives; low-income groups, in particular, lacked the interest to identify and become engaged with them. Lastly, it appears that residents can appreciate such initiatives independent of their active engagement or empowerment.

In contrast to what is suggested in social innovation theory this study revealed that the initiative’s contribution to empowerment, inclusion, and equality was limited, as most of the involved engaged residents were already active in volunteering; the initiative, therefore, hardly contributed to a higher level of civic engagement at the village level. It certainly did not contribute to an increased level of social collaboration and empowerment for groups that are socioeconomically weaker. As it can be argued that it is legitimate and reasonable not to be
involved in such activities (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013) and residents can also appreciate initiatives without having participated in it, it would be worthwhile to further examine when inclusiveness, empowerment, and equality are actually needed and how this may be realised. Moreover, from both civic and government perspectives, this case study revealed a paradox similar to that presented in Chapter 3: where the involved governments intended to shift part of their responsibility for liveability issues towards their residents, it appeared that the residents’ positive evaluation of the initiative’s outputs could be for a substantial part ascribed to the governmental support that the initiative received.

Chapter 5 aimed to examine the motives and abilities that explain non-engagement in civic initiatives and to clarify the relation between such motives and abilities. In this study, the following subquestion (sub-RQ4) was addressed: How can it be explained that some residents do not engage in local initiatives that intend to improve the liveability of their community? From an individual perspective, reasons for non-engagement found in literature were examined through a quantitative panel study in a larger area in which depopulating rural areas are compared to other rural and urban areas. The focus was on the group of ageing residents (45+ years) as they are a majority and have more time available due to their stage in life (Munoz et al. 2014; Kooiman et al., 2016; Ruth and Franklin 2014). Therefore, it was expected that civic engagement would increasingly depend on them.

First, the results showed that the majority of the respondents did not engage in the past two years, and one-third of this group had no intention to do so in the future. It also turned out that in all areas the respondents were quite satisfied with the liveability of their communities. The main reasons for non-engagement were that the respondents had other priorities, did not feel capable to engage or felt that the responsibility for local liveability belonged to the local government. In line with previous findings in recent literature, this study demonstrated that the reasons for non-engagement can also be ascribed to specific motivations or lacking abilities. The main reason appeared to be the same in all areas: a general unwillingness to engage. Furthermore, in rural depopulating areas non-engagement was most prominent among the lower educated;
group with a higher presence in these areas (Bock, 2019). The lacking motivation among residents to engage in the future was explained by the fact that the respondents felt less involved in their communities. In the other rural and urban areas, non-engagement was explained by the prevailing idea that local liveability is a governmental responsibility as well as the inability to engage because of age and health limitations.

In recent literature, low levels of civic engagement or the lack thereof are often explained by a lack of empowerment and civic or community agency (Brennan and Luloff 2006; Andrews et al. 2008; Skerrat and Hall 2011; Skerrat and Steiner 2013; Hafer and Ran 2016). Civic engagement in rural community development has often been referred to as a positive and necessary development. On the basis of the findings, it can be concluded that further discussion is needed about the norm of civic engagement prevailing in academic and policy arenas, as well as the assumption that civic non-engagement is a problem that needs to be addressed. This study demonstrates that residents may not intend to effectuate or exceed their agency by becoming active in civic initiatives, and that they may not have any specific motivations or lacking abilities that can be addressed. Furthermore, it is questionable whether it can be expected of individual citizens to take care of issues that are of general interest. This is also because of the risk that the needs and interests of substantial groups of ‘non-engers’ remain unrecognised. Therefore, it can be argued that retreating local governments do need to be in the final lead in warranting the public good.

6.3 Dynamics, potentials and limitations of novel governance forms with citizens in the lead

At the core of this thesis are novel forms of governance with civic and government engagement in rural depopulating areas that are meant to solve local liveability issues through high levels of civic engagement and self-reliance. This research demonstrated that the incitement to a more prominent civic role in local decision-making does not appear to be a linear but a dynamic process in which the governance pathways can go in different directions. Such novel governance forms, as the term already indicates, can be seen as social innovations, as they involve the innovation of social relationships within a community and with local governments, the empowerment of citizens and the creation of novel forms of meeting human needs (Mc Callum et
al., 2009). From the perspective of Evolutionary Governance Theory, this research showed that social innovation in the form of shifting decision-making and implementation to citizens is not a definitive outcome, but is on a governance pathway that can evolve in all directions. Where new forms of collaboration offer solutions for local problems and result in successful results at one moment, they can fade away at another moment because of a variety of factors. When there is a high degree of institutionalisation of novel governance modes with higher levels of civic self-reliance within the local government concerned, it seems more likely that governments can successfully facilitate new decision-making roles for citizens in the longer term. This is reflected in, among others, specific policies and regulations, the stimulation of and embedding in the organisation of working modes tailored to citizens and adjustments to a more accessible organisational structure. When there is a combination of a more common government structure and work routines, difficulties in communication and resulting inflexibility towards citizens are more likely to contribute to unstable governance paths. This may be due to, among other things, inconsistent government actions and tensions between internal organisation columns, stricter adherence to existing formal, and more rigid procedures and political change.

From the perspective of depopulating villages, it appeared that to maintain the continuity of success there must be enthusiastic front-runner groups who receive broad social support and who continue to achieve visible social and material outputs. Furthermore, it came to the fore that governments should not only be flexible and accessible to their residents but that citizens should gain a better understanding of (legal) formal procedures within the government. In this way, it can be prevented that residents get frustrated in time, experience a lack of collaboration and, in the end, lose the energy to collaborate. This is also of great importance because local governments have legal core tasks for which they remain accountable at all times; the use of public money and the regulations within the social or spatial domain which all imply formal procedures that need to be followed. As was also found in previous research (Edelenbos et al., 2018; Nederhand et al., 2016), ‘boundary spanners’ or ‘brokers’ play an indispensable role in bridging the − often separate − realities of residents and governments involved.
More specifically at the initiative level, shifts in the organisational structure (the structural level of interactions) and the governance process (the intentional level of internal interactions) determine the governance pathway and therefore affect the evolution of an initiative in terms of its self-steering capacity (Kooiman, 2003; Van Assche et al., 2014; Beunen et al., 2015). This research shows that formal institutions that arise from the involvement of public money can play an important role in this: the formal agreements and rules for public accountability. When citizens obtain or want to obtain access to public money, certainly when substantial amounts are involved, there is a risk that accountability makes managing an initiative too complex. Where local governments only need to account to their councils, citizens have to deal with a two-fold accountability to both the village and the local government. Moreover, the volunteering citizens may end up in a central position in the organisation structure in which they are accountable for managing the interactions of multiple actors who are continuously redefining their interrelation. This is not only stressful and difficult; it also clearly affects the development of the community’s self-steering capacity in time.

This research demonstrated that novel governance forms with citizens who put their heart and soul into their village and government support have the potential to successfully realise social and material outputs; these can be widely appreciated at the village level, also by residents who are not involved.

In addition, several important limitations came to the fore. First, it seems that more structural forms of self-reliance at the village level are not realistic. The studied initiatives mainly leaned on the shoulder of small core groups of residents who, despite widespread support at the village level, were vulnerable. It turned out, for example, that the involved volunteers do not always have the right competencies for the (complex) issues they need to address. This is certainly a risk when all sorts of conditions need to be met and accounted for to multiple actors, such as institutions within the village, the authorities involved and external subsidy providers. As a result, there is the risk of their eventual withdrawal because of individual overburden and tensions and conflict both within initiatives and within the villages. It also appeared that social support for an initiative (or parts of it) may disappear over time, because self-steering activities may not be sufficiently understood within villages. This may be, for example, due to the relatively invisible
and elusive activities of leading core groups and the lack of regular tangible outputs. Tensions and misunderstanding may even lead to social divides that affect the local liveability negatively rather than contributing to it. Furthermore, it turned out that active residents most times preferred to commit themselves to concrete projects with a demarcated beginning and end and are far less likely to accept long-term responsibilities. Enduring activities seem more likely to come into the picture when based on direct interests (of individuals or organisations).

A second important limitation regards the biased cost-benefit analysis that governments refer to when assuming that residents can warrant the liveability more efficiently than that they can do themselves. After all, it should not be forgotten that governments’ motivation to support such initiatives above all is in lowering public budget costs and the search for possible alternatives to solve local issues. In policy arenas, the emphasis is put on the (supposed) material and social benefits, such as the realisation of the projected outcomes and the increased social cohesion as part of the process of village empowerment. In doing so, from a civic perspective, two important questions then remain unaddressed. It needs to be asked if residents are indeed more efficient than governments in ensuring local liveability at lower costs and which (and whose) costs are taken into account. This research demonstrated that initiatives often require years of intensive voluntary efforts of which the number worked hours are not financially expressed and in which involved residents undergo numerous individual and social risks. This is certainly the case when there are substantial (public) subsidies that submerge the involved volunteers in the related responsibilities; they even run the risk of getting trapped in an initiative because of the sense of responsibility or the risk of the loss of personal reputation when withdrawing (De Haan, 2019). Government savings then lead to hidden financial and social costs of volunteering citizens which often are unjustifiably neglected.

Moreover, this research showed that even when residents at the village level experience the positive social ‘side-effects’ as believed in within policy arenas, this certainly does not have to be the case. In particular, the residents who are already active in other voluntary work also volunteer in new local collaborations. Therefore, broader levels of social engagement and empowerment are not always achieved. Furthermore, there is no evidence for the argument that citizens are more effective than governments because citizens supposedly know their villages better and can, therefore, develop more meaningful and creative projects. It may as well be that
there are other and more effective governmental strategies, certainly when considering other research which found that in such novel governance forms government interference is intensified rather than diminished (Healey, 2015; Edelenbos et al., 2018). In the given context this would require further inquiry.

A third limitation of novel governance forms led by citizens lies in the difficulty of ensuring the democratic implementation and embedding of such initiatives over time. At the community level, it appears to be complicated to involve residents in the important developments of governance initiatives in the longer term; repetitive discussions with the community about decisions and related actions and adjusting these turned out to be troublesome, time-consuming and difficult to achieve. It is also possible that involved resident groups only represent an entire community to a limited extent (Tonkens & Verhoeven 2012; 2018) and that this may differ in time. For larger projects with substantial external funding, the risk emerges that a new kind of ‘civic government layer’ may come into being to guarantee a certain form of legitimacy and representativeness for their choices and actions. These factors carry along the risk of lacking countervailing power from the village, also because the residents involved have their hands full with the daily governance dynamics towards goal realisation. Then the question emerges how democratic such ad hoc developments are at both the village and the municipal level and how their legitimacy may be ensured in the long term — a complicated matter which would require further inquiry.

6.4 To conclude

This thesis demonstrates that concrete projects and activities led by specific groups of residents and with government support can yield valuable results. In most cases such forms of governance with higher levels of decision-making by citizens are temporary, but if there are direct interests involved, they can continue to exist in the longer term. They can also empower the residents who are directly involved. However, it is recommended that both the residents and governments involved are aware of the—often unpredictable—governance dynamics and limitations and take these into account in their decision-making and actions. Even when decision-making power is temporary shifted to certain groups of residents, the findings of this thesis suggest
that, in the end, the local governments in depopulating rural areas should remain primarily responsible for warranting the local liveability and the wellbeing of all citizens.
6.5 References


Tonkens, E. and Verhoeven, I. (2018). The participation support paradox: fighting unequal participation in deprived neighbourhoods. Urban Studies 0(00), 1-16.