Citizens’ Initiatives in depopulating rural areas

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 06-04-2020
Introduction
1.1 Background

Collective action within communities that serves a shared purpose dates far back in history (De Moor 2008). In recent years, financial crises, austerity measures, market failures and the downsizing of welfare states have spurred growing interest in the topic of citizens’ participation. Whereas central governments previously decided how budgets were to be spent and assumed responsibility for many aspects of the living environment of citizens, this responsibility is now increasingly being transferred to or taken up by regional or local governments. Furthermore, citizens are invited—or initiate actions themselves—to take over these responsibilities from local and regional governments (Tonkens 2006). The so-called ‘localism agenda’, entailing a shift in organizational focus from the central government at the national scale towards the local level, has received increasing attention (Jones and Ormston 2014; Lowndes and Sullivan 2008).

Throughout Western societies, these changes have occurred alongside the shift from ‘Big Government’ to ‘Big Society’ (Kampen et al. 2013; Konig 2015; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Tonkens 2009). In light of the need for austerity measures, the underlying expectation is that more active participation of citizens will contribute to the efficiency of the local public domain. A similar trend, described as a transition towards the ‘participation society’ (Movisie 2017), is evident within Dutch society, where withdrawal of the (central) state both necessitates and provides more opportunities for an enhanced role of regional and local governments and for citizen participation. The ‘participation society’ was first introduced officially in 2013 (Central Government 2013) and has since taken shape gradually. Accordingly, citizens have been requested and offered an opportunity to be more responsible for their own physical living environments as well as related domains such as health, digitalization, social wellbeing and public transport. This changing context, entailing more active citizen participation, implies a change in role patterns, responsibilities and power relations for both citizens and governments. Moreover, it has been argued that this shift entails greater empowerment of citizens because they are increasingly having more say over their living environments and have acquired the ‘right to challenge’ under the assumption of better being able to provide a service compared to a government institution (Espejo and Bendek 2011; Jones and Ormston 2014; Steiner and Farmer 2017; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2013). Within the participation society, citizens’ initiatives are a specific form of bottom-up movement in which individuals avail of the opportunity to take the lead in managing their living environments.

The research topic examined in this thesis is citizens’ initiatives in depopulating rural areas of the Netherlands. Although citizens’ initiatives emerge within varying spatial settings, active participation of citizens appears to be subject to different processes and expectations in rural areas compared with those in metropolitan areas (Gieling & Haartsen 2017; van Houwelingen et al. 2014; Syssner and Meijer 2017). For example, compared with urban dwellers, people in rural settings are
more often active as volunteers and have more contact with their neighbours (Steenbekkers et al. 2006), which can influence how citizens’ initiatives function in a rural context. Moreover, active participation can assume greater urgency in rural areas (Gieling and Haartsen 2017; Syssner and Meijer 2017) because of changes such as (projected) depopulation, ageing, digital exclusion, school closures, unemployment, underemployment, high mobility costs, changing consumption demands and an expanded scale. These kinds of changes can have a stronger impact on rural areas compared with urban areas (Copus et al. 2011; Salemink 2016; Skerratt 2010; Steiner and Atterton 2014; Woods 2006). Moreover, there is some evidence that instances of communities taking over what were formerly (local) government tasks are more frequent in rural settings than in urban settings (Syssner and Meijer 2017).

Three types of citizens’ initiatives that provide services and facilities can be distinguished. The first type includes initiatives in which citizens have availed of the opportunity to provide a service that has disappeared, or is on the verge of disappearing, as a result of the central state’s withdrawal. An example of this kind of initiative is the maintenance of public green spaces, such as parks (Sellick 2014). A second type of citizens’ initiative involving service delivery entails the takeover of existing facilities or services that were not government-initiated; for example, the maintenance of a village shop (Calderwood and Davies 2013; Meijer 2018). The third type of citizens’ initiative entails the provision of a new type of service or facility at the outset. An example is the provision of internet access using a broadband connection or sustainable energy that has not previously been available in the region (Ashmore et al. 2014; Salemink 2016; Van Der Schoor and Scholtens 2015).

The participation of citizens in these three types of service delivery is presumed to be essential for attuning the service to local needs and could possibly lead to the provision of higher quality services (Bock 2016; Boonstra and Boelens 2011; Healey 2015). Thus, citizens’ initiatives are believed to have the potential to enable the quality of life, or the liveability of rural communities, to be maintained and enhanced (Syssner and Meijer 2017). Liveability, which is itself a contested concept, can be understood as the extent to which the living environment is aligned with the needs and desires of the inhabitants (Leidelmeijer and van Kamp 2003). However, demonstrating the existence of a direct relationship between the availability of services and liveability, and between participation and liveability, is a challenging task (Gieling 2018). Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus about the importance of meeting, collaborating and expanding networks of (rural) inhabitants to foster and strengthen a sense of community and liveability. Therefore, the focus in this thesis is on citizens’ initiatives that are intended to play a role in the provision of services and facilities as well as on initiatives aimed at contributing to the liveability of the respective village or neighbourhood.
The shift towards the ‘participation society’ in relation to service provision in rural areas has seemingly generated debates around three central issues: democracy, accessibility and continuity. Edelenbos et al. (2017) distinguished three models of democracy: representative, participatory and self-organizing. Representative democracy refers to the traditional welfare state model, which is based on the premise of the representativeness of citizens, given that governments are elected through voting. Participatory democracy entails the active participation of citizens in decision making as well as policy formulation. A self-organizing democracy also entails the active participation of citizens. However, participation does not take place on the government’s terms; instead, citizens have the power and opportunity to implement their own plans and ideas. Citizens’ initiatives within the ‘participation society’ seem to fit best with the self-organizing democracy. They are not necessarily representative in terms of elections, but they do entail an agenda-setting power and can raise issues that are important for communities (Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018). In most cases, the participants in citizens’ initiatives are highly skilled and highly educated individuals who are thus overrepresented. Therefore, they do not represent all of the interests within a community. Furthermore, not every community is engaged in this type of participation (Salemink 2016; Skerratt and Steiner 2013). There are communities that lack the ability or willingness to start citizens’ initiatives, potentially resulting in growing disparities in levels of service delivery.

There may also be differences in the accessibility of services arising from existing differences among communities and whether or not they have developed citizens’ initiatives. Skerratt (2010, p. 1737) described how ‘hot spots’, that is, communities with services, and ‘not spots’, or communities lacking these services, can emerge in rural areas when service delivery is contingent on community participation, for example, in the form of citizens’ initiatives. This situation can lead to increasing inequality among rural regions, exclusion from services and ultimately uneven rural development (Ashmore et al. 2014; Salemink 2016).

Continuity plays a role in relation to the potential of citizens’ initiatives to serve as an alternative for otherwise disappearing services (whether or not these services were formerly state-led). Thus far, the extent to which citizens’ initiatives can function as a long-term alternative in the area of service provision remains unclear. The continuity of citizens’ initiatives can be distinguished at different levels: participant, group and initiative. At the level of participants, individual members of an initiative can continue with or halt their activities, for example, because they have other priorities or are experiencing volunteer burnout (Allen and Mueller 2013; Salemink 2016). At the group level, it is necessary for all members of a group of initiators to cooperate for the initiative to be sustained. Moreover, leadership and decision-making skills as well as social capital are required for its continuity (Brandsen and Helderma 2012; Jicha et al. 2011; Lambru and Petrescu 2016; Liu and Besser 2003). At the level of the initiative, the participation of group members may change over time, but the initiative itself can endure and be successful. All of the above
levels of continuity are contingent on the efforts of individual members of the initiatives. Insights into the continuity of citizens’ initiatives and their role in rural service provision would make a valuable contribution to policy and practice, given the potential risks resulting from participation in a citizens’ initiative. These risks include the aforementioned volunteer burnout (Allen and Mueller 2013; Salemink 2016) and accountability (David et al. 2013; Flinders and Moon 2011; Sellick 2014) as well as exclusion of individuals outside of the initiatives (Ashmore et al. 2014; Salemink 2016; Skerratt 2010).

A situation in which citizens are willing to assume responsibility for their living environment by providing services would necessitate changes in role patterns and power relations between citizens and government institutions, such as the latter’s relinquishment of their former responsibilities (van Houwelingen et al. 2014; Sellick 2014). In light of changing responsibilities, role patterns and power relations, the relationship between governments and citizens’ initiatives is an important consideration. Citizens’ initiatives generally depend to a large extent on funding or other forms of support provided by governments (Nederhand et al. 2016). In order to acquire these funds or resources, the specific requirements of governments often have to be met. This implies that citizens have to take responsibility for their initiatives while simultaneously complying with the requirements of local and regional governments. Research indicates that citizens’ initiatives that are aligned with existing government policies have higher chances of success (Li et al. 2016). However, this alignment constrains the freedom of the initiatives to pursue their own course of action. Therefore, even when it seems that responsibilities have changed and shifted, dependence on governments could still persist, thereby complicating the relationship between governments and citizens’ initiatives. Meijer (2016) refers to this situation as an institutional misfit in which required role changes associated with the ‘participation society’ have not yet been put into practise. Thus, it would appear that much remains to be done to achieve the realization of a society in which citizens are more responsible for their own lives and living environments (Movisie 2017).

1.2 Research aim and questions

Governments are responsible for encouraging the replacement of services and facilities that are under pressure, have disappeared or have not materialized through citizens’ initiatives (Bock 2016; Calderwood and Davies 2013; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016). However, little is currently known about what the success and continuity of citizens’ initiatives actually entails and how they can be enabled. Given the context discussed in the previous section, a central aim of this thesis was to examine the success, failure and continuity of citizens’ initiatives in depopulating rural areas, exploring how these concepts are perceived by various stakeholders and the role of citizens’ initiatives
within the ‘participation society’. The main research question of the study was as follows: *How can citizens’ initiatives be described and understood in terms of success, failure and continuity in its local context of depopulation in rural areas?* This central question was addressed through four sub-research questions.

The first of these questions, (RQ 1), focused on the conceptualization of success and failure from the perspective of professionals and was formulated as follows: *How can the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives be defined?* To date, few studies have attempted to conceptualize the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives. Many studies have identified factors that influence their success and failure, such as skills, networks, social capital and leadership (Nowell and Boyd 2014; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016; Taló et al. 2014). However, the conceptualization of both the success and the failure of citizens’ initiatives has not been attempted within these studies. An understanding of success and failure is a starting point for the further exploration of the factors influencing both, and, as such, contributes to successful citizens’ initiatives.

The second research question, (RQ 2), relates to the perceptions of the initiators regarding factors influencing the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives as follows: *Which factors contribute to the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives?* Adequate support for citizens’ initiatives requires an understanding of their mechanisms which ultimately contribute to effective service provision in depopulating rural areas. Whereas previous studies have identified factors influencing the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives, in this study, existing insights were combined with an investigation of the perspectives of the initiators themselves. Furthermore, success was also conceptualized from the perspective of the initiators. Insights into how success and failure can be understood and which factors influence them illustrate how citizens’ initiatives work and how they can be facilitated.

The third research question, (RQ 3), focused on continuity from the perspective of initiators. For citizens’ initiatives to become a stable alternative in service provision, their continuity is also a salient factor. The development of citizens’ initiatives as a long-term alternative to government-provided services in rural areas requires an understanding of the factors that influence their continuity as well as those pertaining to their success and failure, which can contribute to the provision of more fine-tuned support of such initiatives. Thus, RQ 3 was formulated as follows: *Which factors influence the continuity of citizens’ initiatives?*

The fourth and final research question, (RQ 4), relates to failure. A review of the existing body of literature on citizens’ initiatives reveals an emphasis on the success stories of citizens’ initiatives (Meijer 2017). Nonetheless, it is important to look at failed citizens’ initiatives as well to identify the stages in the process where things can go wrong and to determine how these issues can be prevented in the future. Thus, RQ 4 was formulated as follows: *Which processes contribute to the failure of citizens’ initiatives?*
1.3 Defining the concept of citizens’ initiatives

Against the backdrop of depopulation and the ‘participation society’, active citizens have increasingly received attention within academic debates. Even though citizens’ cooperation to attain a shared goal has occurred throughout history (De Moor 2008), citizens’ initiatives refer to a specific form of active citizenship in which citizens themselves take the initiative to achieve a certain goal in the public domain that could otherwise have been organized by a government institution or by a commercial enterprise. Citizens’ initiatives are not simply about participation, as they include more than just engagement with local governments and having a say in policy or decision making (May 2007). Citizens’ initiatives entail the active adoption and implementation of goals that contribute to the public domain, such as organizing meeting places or maintaining a supermarket or library in a rural village.

Several concepts that are used to refer to forms of active citizenship overlap in their meanings, such as social innovation, social enterprises, social cooperatives, neo-endogenous developments and grassroots initiatives (Ayob et al. 2016; Bock 2016; Bosworth et al. 2015; Brandsen and Helderman 2012; Fazzi 2011; Kelly and Caputo 2006; Montgomery et al. 2012; Shucksmith 2010; Teasdale 2012).

Although the concepts of social innovation and citizens’ initiatives both entail collective action, their meanings differ. Even though there is no agreement on a uniform definition of social innovation (Neumeier 2012), this can be understood as ‘a motor of change rooted in social collaboration and social learning, the response to unmet social needs as a desirable outcome’ (Bock 2016, p. 4). Central to the concept of social innovation is the creation of new ways of innovating society. Differing from social innovation, citizens’ initiatives are not specifically formed to foster new ideas and relationships. Therefore, social innovation can be part of a citizens’ initiative when the initiative includes innovative ways of addressing unmet social needs, but this is not a necessity.

Citizens’ initiatives also share the notion of collective action with social enterprises and social cooperatives, which are a type of social enterprise (Fazzi 2011; Montgomery et al. 2012; Teasdale 2012). Although the concept of social enterprises is contested (Teasdale 2012), in general it can be understood as ‘collaboration amongst similar as well as diverse actors for the purpose of applying business principles to solving social problems’ (Montgomery et al. 2012, p. 376). Accordingly, citizens’ initiatives can be understood as a type of social enterprise but with the following proviso: citizens’ initiatives always comprise citizens. Whereas other parties may be involved in the initiative, they are not founding members, as would be the case for social enterprises.

Citizens’ initiatives also share commonalities with neo-endogenous development, such as being bottom-up movements that focus on the local scale. Neo-endogenous rural development centres on ‘bottom-up’ activities that integrate external
Influences to increase local potential’ (Bosworth et al. 2015, p. 427). Citizens’ initiatives depart from neo-endogenous development, given that they do not necessarily entail partnerships with the government or long-term cooperation with social actors outside of the initiative. However, the involvement of a local or regional government in a citizens’ initiative is possible and frequently occurs in practice through the provision of financial support. Another example of government involvement is its support of initiatives through the provision of expert knowledge.

Citizens’ initiatives seem to share the highest level of commonality with grassroots initiatives. Traditionally, grassroots initiatives were mostly associated with political activism (Grabs et al. 2016). Nowadays, however, grassroots initiatives also play a role in community development (Kelly and Caputo 2006) and can be understood as a ‘collaborative social undertaking that is organized at the local community level, has a high degree of participatory decision-making and flat hierarchies’ (Grabs et al. 2016, p. 100). Similar to grassroots initiatives, citizens’ initiatives entail community-based collaboration between volunteers, who aim to make changes that will benefit members of the community (Connors 2010; Grabs et al. 2016; Kelly and Caputo 2006). Both types of initiatives require the capacity to mobilize necessary resources within the community. Furthermore, both can include hard assets (physical structures) as well as soft assets (community service) that are adapted to local needs (ibid.). Even though the composition of both types of initiatives is confined to community members, citizens’ initiatives distinguish themselves through their strong focus on the public domain and the different organizational forms that they can assume. Moreover, the flat hierarchy found within grassroots initiatives is not a prerequisite for citizens’ initiatives, thereby enabling citizens’ initiatives to take up more complex tasks. In this thesis, the following definition of citizens’ initiatives is used: formally or informally organized groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain on a voluntary basis without financial compensation.

Changes in roles and responsibilities occur when citizens’ initiatives take over formerly public tasks (Van Meerkerk et al. 2013). Nevertheless, governments and citizens’ initiatives remain in a strong interdependent relationship in most cases (Edelenbos et al. 2016) for reasons that include accountability (Flinders and Moon 2011; Jones and Ormston 2014), funding (Verhoeven and Tonkens 2011), existing policies (Nederhand et al. 2016) and opposing interests (Salemink and Strijker 2018). In a study that examined the interdependencies between citizens and government institutions, Kuindersma et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of power relations. Power refers to the extent to which an individual is able to carry out their will, despite (potential) resistance (Parsons and Henderson 1965). In addition to having power over material resources, it includes the abilities to set agendas and determine social-economic structures as well as to develop ideas and perspectives (Kuindersma et al. 2012). To better understand the relationships existing between governments and citizens, it is necessary to understand how these power relations are filled-in in practice (ibid.). Aarts et al. (2010) showed that there was a lack of clarity regarding the roles and functions of citizens and governments.
within the ‘participation society’. They further pointed to the need to establish a new balance in accountability and responsibility. Power relations matter for citizens’ initiatives because they determine whether these initiatives can take control in relation to certain topics. An understanding of these power relations and interdependencies is also important when considering who decides on what the desired outcomes of citizens’ initiatives should be, and, thus, what success and failure entail.

1.4 Methods and data

This thesis examines the factors and aspects that influence the success, failure and continuity of citizens’ initiatives and the mechanisms through which they do so. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied in the study, which was conducted in three northern provinces of the Netherlands. Dutch rural areas are not as remote as comparative areas in other EU member countries. Thus, the rural Dutch setting is representative of intermediate rural areas located within the vicinity of urban areas. Compared with urban areas, such areas are less densely populated and face a prospective population decline (see Figure 1). Moreover, levels of community participation are higher in these areas than they are in urban areas (CBS n.d.; Haartsen and Venhorst 2010; van Houwelingen et al. 2014). The patterns revealed in this study could also have implications beyond the Dutch context, given that similar expectations of greater self-reliance and more active participation of citizens prevail outside of this context. A mix of methods was applied to obtain an overview of the citizens’ initiatives examined in the study areas.

Figure 1: Expected population decline in the Netherlands (Source: CBS & PBL)
First, a focus group discussion was organized to conceptualize the success of citizens’ initiatives. Three focus group discussions involving professionals with expertise on citizens’ initiatives were held, each lasting two hours on average. A total of 23 professionals participated in the focus group discussions. For each session, three discussion rounds were conducted to build the understanding of the concept of success. During round one, preliminary thoughts on success were framed. The findings of the first round were then discussed and further elaborated during the second round. During the final round, conclusions relating to the discussions from the first two rounds were formulated, discussed and confirmed.

Following the focus group discussions, a questionnaire was distributed among groups of citizens that had implemented initiatives in three northern provinces of the Netherlands where depopulation has occurred or is expected to occur in the future. Subsequently, the data from these questionnaires were compiled. Before sending out this questionnaire, an inventory of citizens’ initiatives was created based on information obtained from local and regional governments, planning bureaus and through an internet search for citizens’ initiatives in the study area. The snowball sampling method was then applied to identify initiatives operating outside of the scope of the above information sources. Subsequently, a database comprising 623 initiatives was constructed, with contact details available for 585 of them. The questionnaire was administered among these 585 initiatives and was completed by representatives of 157 of them, resulting in a response rate of 26.8%. The questionnaire was developed around two themes: success and continuity. The initiators of the citizens’ initiatives were asked to answer questions about the possible factors that influence their initiatives’ success and continuity and to evaluate expectations of the continuity of their initiative and its performance.

The third step entailed the conduct of three case studies focusing on citizens’ initiatives that were perceived as failures by the initiators. In-depth interviews were held with these initiators but also with professionals who played were involved with the initiatives in a different role. A semi-structured interview format was used to discuss the processes that led to the failure of the initiatives. The data collection was supplemented by information drawn from other sources, such as the initiatives’ websites, minutes of meetings, project plan documents and policy documents.

1.5 Outline

Chapters 2–5 comprise the core section of this thesis, with each of these chapters separately addressing one of the four research questions of the study. Chapter 2 addresses RQ 1 and conceptualizes the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives. The focus in this chapter is on the perspectives of professionals on the concept of success. Their collective understanding of success and failure was constructed through focus group discussions. The professionals included government officials as well as professionals working with citizens’ initiatives in the field.
The inclusion of various perspectives in the analysis was necessary to understand and formulate the concept of success. Therefore, the initiators’ perspectives on success are examined in Chapters 3 to 5. Chapter 3 elaborates on the framework of success developed in Chapter 2 and explores the initiators’ perspectives on the concept of success by applying principal component analysis. Furthermore, RQ 2 is addressed in Chapter 3, and factors that influence the self-evaluated success of citizens’ initiatives are identified. A model to predict self-evaluated success is derived from the performance of regression analysis based on the data from the questionnaire distributed to citizens’ initiatives. In addition, the different perspectives of professionals and initiators concerning the concept of success are discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4, which is aimed at addressing RQ 3, focuses on continuity. It provides insights on the expectations that initiators have regarding the continuity of their initiatives. It presents the results of a regression analysis on expected continuity based on data obtained from the questionnaire on citizens’ initiatives. This analysis revealed which factors influence the expected continuity of citizens’ initiatives. Moreover, the roles that citizens’ initiatives can play in service provision and their relation to continuity are explored.

Chapter 5, which is aimed at addressing RQ 4, examines the processes that contribute to the failure of citizens’ initiatives. The findings of three case studies of citizens’ initiatives which were perceived as failures by their initiators and for which 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted are presented. An integral approach for examining the process of failure was adopted. In light of six obstacles that these initiatives may encounter, as revealed through a review of the literature on citizens’ initiatives, this chapter examines how these obstacles constitute part of the entire process of perceived failure and how this process is shaped by other influences.

Chapter 6, which is the final chapter of this thesis, combines the findings and insights derived from the preceding chapters to formulate general conclusions. In addition, the implications of the findings of this study for policy are explored.
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