‘At some point it has been enough’ - Processes of perceived failure of citizens’ initiatives
ABSTRACT

Citizens’ initiatives are believed to be a suitable alternative approach to service provision, especially in rural areas where services and facilities are under pressure because of depopulation and the decentralization measures of the state. To date, research has mainly focused on successful examples of these types of initiatives, revealing which factors influence success and how success can be facilitated. However, understanding the process of failure is equally important in order to provide the needed support and to increase the chances of success. This paper specifically focuses on citizens’ initiatives that are perceived by their initiators to have failed. This study adopts an integral approach, not only focusing on failure factors but also considering failure as a process. Within the literature, six obstacles to the success of citizens’ initiatives were identified based on studies of success. Three case studies on failed citizens’ initiatives in the Northern Netherlands revealed three themes in the process of perceived failure: interactions with governments and institutions, appropriation and personal investment. We also conclude that the process of perceived failure is dominated by a discrepancy of scale because citizens’ initiatives operate on the local level, yet they depend on and must interact with governments and institutions that operate at the regional level.
5.1 Introduction

Local transport to schools, a village living room, community shops and community gardens: these and other examples of successful citizens’ initiatives are widespread throughout the media and have been subjected to numerous evaluations (see for example: Bultsma, van der Veen, & Hitzert, 2015; Drent, 2017; Groninger Dorpen, 2015; Jonker-Verkaart & Lupi, 2017; Provincie Groningen, 2017; van der Veen, 2017; Visser, Lupi, & Dorenbos, 2016). In the context of the Big Society, local and regional governments encourage the transfer of responsibilities to citizens’ initiatives because of their potential to create customized alternatives in public service provision (Brannan et al. 2006; Cheshire & Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones & Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Thiede et al. 2017). A drawback of the existing body of literature on citizens’ initiatives is that the focus is mostly on successful initiatives (Meijer 2017; Taló et al. 2014; Wandersman 2009). This focus results in a bias towards best practices and leaves the processes and consequences of unsuccessful citizens’ initiatives under-researched. Although some factors that contribute to the failure of citizens’ initiatives have been identified in studies on best practices (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), the interrelatedness of these factors and the failure process has thus far been neglected in research.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the processes that lead to the failure of citizens’ initiatives. The focus is not merely on factors contributing to failure as such; rather, an integral approach is adopted in order to understand failure as a process composed of interrelated factors. By using three cases within depopulating areas in the northern rural areas of the Netherlands, the following research question will be answered: How can the processes by which citizens’ initiatives fail be described and explained? The cases are examples of what we call failed citizens’ initiatives, as the initiators perceive them as such. This does not automatically mean that the initiatives have stopped entirely. This paper first explores the existing literature on citizens’ initiatives and factors influencing their failure, followed by a description of the methods used. Finally, the findings of the case study are described, and conclusions regarding failed citizens’ initiatives are presented.

5.2 Obstacles and risks for citizens’ initiatives

Given the aforementioned shift towards the Big Society, citizen participation in the public domain has received considerable attention within current research (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b). Different concepts are used to describe the same general form of voluntary collaboration among citizens, including grassroots initiatives, social innovation, bottom-up social enterprises and social cooperatives (Bock 2016; Bosworth et al. 2015; Brandsen & Helderman 2012; Fazzi 2011; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b; Kaehne 2015; Kelly & Caputo 2006; Li et al. 2016). We prefer to use the concept of citizens’ initiatives because these initiatives not only imply involvement in local governance processes (May 2007)
but also focus on realizing specific goals, such as replacing an existing facility or service (following the definitions of, for example, Brannan et al. 2006; Calderwood & Davies 2013; Rosol 2012). We define citizens’ initiatives as formally or informally organized groups of citizens who are active in and contribute to the public domain (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b; de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018).

Many studies have focused on the success of citizens’ initiatives and the factors influencing this success (see, for example, Allen & Mueller, 2013; Beer, 2014; Haggett & Aitken, 2015; Lambru & Petrescu, 2016; Munoz, Steiner, & Farmer, 2015; Neumeier, 2012; O'Shaughnessy & O’Hara, 2016; Salemink, 2016; Salemink & Strijker, 2016; Steiner & Atterton, 2014; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2011; Wiseman, 2006). In the present study, the focus is on the process of perceived failure as defined by the initiators and perceived by the stakeholders involved. There is no explicit definition of the failure of citizens’ initiatives, but it is likely that success and failure function on a continuum: not being successful to a certain extent implies that the citizens’ initiative has failed (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). Initiatives that never materialize due to a lack of social capital, sense of urgency or low educational levels, for example, can also be considered as failures (Salemink & Strijker 2018). However, the focus of this paper is explicitly on citizens’ initiatives that have started and progressed in their development but are perceived to have failed by the initiators themselves. In reviewing the existing literature on the failure of citizens’ initiatives, several contributing factors emerge. Additionally, the absence of factors identified as success factors (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b; de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), such as a lack of skills within the initiators group or an insufficient network, could be considered a factor in failure. This paper focuses specifically on the process of failure of citizens’ initiatives and thus on particular factors that contribute to failure. Based on the literature review, six aspects appear to create the largest obstacles and risks to citizens’ initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government and existing and changing policies. These aspects will be discussed in the following section.

**Not representing the community** can influence the failure of citizens’ initiatives. Representation can take two forms: representation of the composition of the community and representation of the interests of the community. Regarding representation of the community’s composition, Tonkens and Verhoeven (2018) note that representation within citizens’ initiatives is largely distributed unequally, as highly educated, white, male, middle-aged community members are usually overrepresented. Nevertheless, representation plays an important role in the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives because it supports the community in developing and improving its initiatives. Edelenbos et al. (2016) further illustrate the importance of representing the interests of the community. Representing the interests of the community provides the initiative with legitimacy and thus increases its chances of success. Not being representative of the community can lead to a loss of legitimacy and often results in the failure of citizens’ initiatives.
Another aspect of failure that is often highlighted in the existing literature is **volunteer burnout**. Citizens’ initiatives can fail when participants stop their activities, and one cause of such stoppage is volunteer burnout. Being involved with a citizens’ initiative can place immense pressure on the participants because they invest so much of their time, energy and skills in the initiative. Experiencing too much strain as a result of their participation in the initiative can lead to volunteer burnout and may cause the participants to quit their activities entirely (Allen & Mueller 2013; Salemink & Strijker 2016).

The **scale** at which the initiatives operate can also influence failure. Citizens’ initiatives mostly operate at the local level and are more likely to succeed at that level. Sometimes, the goals of citizens’ initiatives concern the regional level, e.g., maintaining public transport for a region. Operating at the regional level involves a higher level of complexity for the citizens’ initiatives, since more complex and increasingly diverse legislation is required and generating support becomes more complicated. Operating on the regional level can thus be a failure factor for citizens’ initiatives (Meijer 2018; Salemink & Strijker 2018).

**Insufficient financial means** is another factor that can contribute to failure (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Salemink & Strijker 2016; Salemink & Strijker 2018). Citizens’ initiatives progress through several stages (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Munoz et al. 2015; Salemink & Strijker 2016; Salemink & Strijker 2018). Once the goals are set and a stable group has formed, it is essential to secure sufficient funding to continue to develop further and achieve the initiative’s goals. In general, an important source of funding is local and regional governments. Lack of financial involvement from these governments can have a negative influence on the success of citizens’ initiatives (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). The importance of finances is not always acknowledged by professionals who, in some cases, focus mostly on the positive side effects of the development of citizens’ initiatives, such as learning experiences for the participants (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018b).

The **relationship between citizens’ initiatives and the government** stands out as a critical factor when analysing the failure of citizens’ initiatives. The success of citizens’ initiatives largely depends on the (financial) support of (local) governments (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Nederhand et al. 2016). However, a weakened or troubled relationship with the government can also contribute to initiatives not succeeding and is perceived by initiators as an important failure factor (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). In the context of the shift towards the Big Society, citizens’ initiatives require changes from local and regional governments, i.e., letting go of responsibilities and transferring this responsibility to citizens (Bjärstig & Sandström 2017; Bosworth et al. 2016; Bovaird & Loeffler 2012; Van Meerkerk et al. 2013; Pestoff 2012). However, existing institutional structures remain as they are despite the procedural changes required to support citizens’ initiatives and to enable them to take over responsibilities. Meijer (2016) refers to this as an institutional misfit because these required changes in role patterns for both governments and citizens
often have not yet been put into practice. Van Dam et al. (2015) argue that once governmental organizations formulate their expectations of active citizens and thus make the changes necessary to transfer responsibilities to citizens, this shift can have a performative effect for citizens. The performative effect entails a tendency for citizens’ initiatives to be shaped by the expectations and actions of governmental organizations. As such, by formulating expectations that include the new role patterns, the performative effect could decrease the supposed misfit because it would include the changes that are essential to the initiative’s success.

In the literature, **existing and changing policies** also emerge as an obstacle when further considering the relationship between initiatives and governments. Existing policies can contradict the interests and plans of citizens’ initiatives and become an obstacle to the realization of those plans (Bosworth et al. 2015; Curry 2012; Salemink & Strijker 2016). Elections can contribute to a shift in political power and to new political priorities, and as a result, new policy choices can contradict citizens’ initiatives (Edelenbos et al. 2017; Salemink & Strijker 2018). Several authors argue that citizens’ initiatives should align with existing policy to increase their chances of success (see, for example, Bisschops & Beunen 2018; Li et al. 2016; Nederhand et al. 2016). Furthermore, policies prescribe the pace at which governments can operate, which results in an inability to follow the pace of citizens’ initiatives, and thus the inflexibility of governments can frustrate the process of citizens’ initiatives (Boonstra & Boelens 2011; Salemink & Strijker 2016).

The above-mentioned six aspects related to the failure of citizens’ initiatives are derived from studies on ongoing citizens’ initiatives. It is unclear which role the aspects fulfil in the process of failure and whether this plays out differently for different types of initiatives in rural areas. There is little work focusing on the processes by which citizens’ initiatives fail in different contexts and the consequences of such failures, even though a focus on failed citizens’ initiatives would contribute to developing further insights into these types of initiatives and the prevention of failure (Meijer 2017). This knowledge gap may be explained by the fact that initiators of failed initiatives are more difficult to reach because of the potential stigmatization associated with stopped or failed citizens’ initiatives (Meijer 2017). This paper aims to fill the gap around failed citizens’ initiatives and to shed light on the processes involved with the stoppage and failure of citizens’ initiatives from the perspective of the initiatives themselves.

### 5.3 Three case studies of citizens’ initiatives

#### 5.3.1 Research area and case selection

The analysis presented in the current study is based on qualitative data from three case studies. The initiatives are situated in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands: Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen. The initiatives take place in rural
areas that are experiencing or are expected to experience depopulation; thus, in these areas, the need for citizens’ initiatives to contribute to public service delivery can be more urgent (Copus et al. 2011; Salemink 2016; Skerratt 2010; Steiner & Atterton 2014; Woods 2006). We focus specifically on rural areas, defined according to Dutch standards as having 1000 addresses or fewer per square kilometre (CBS n.d.). Some of the included areas can be considered less popular areas to live, and they attract lower levels of migration compared to more popular rural areas. Motivations to move to these areas include living close to family and friends, favourable housing prices and the physical quality of the environment (Bijker 2013).

Three citizens’ initiatives that perceived their own performance as failed were studied. The initiatives were identified and selected based on an earlier inventory of citizens’ initiatives (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018a). To be selected for the study, the initiatives had to meet the criterion of no longer being active or of struggling, i.e., having failed according to their own perspective. Considering these initiatives as failed does not mean that the initiators had stopped trying to reach their goals or that others perceived the initiative as failed. An even distribution within the three provinces was allowed because different (policy) contexts could play a role in the failure of the initiatives. As much as possible, external professionals involved with the initiatives, such as government officials, were also approached about participation in the case studies. However, not all of them were willing to participate, generally because they had insufficient time to participate or because they had changed jobs in the meantime. The presented findings are thus mainly based on the perspectives of the initiators, but multiple perspectives were included. For all cases, the point of information saturation was reached.

A qualitative research approach was adopted because the aim of this study is not to merely identify failure factors. Rather, our focus is on gaining insights into the process of failure and the interplay among the failure factors that shape this process. Furthermore, identifying failed initiatives has proven to be complicated (Meijer 2017; de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), making a qualitative approach most suitable for this study.

5.3.2 Description of the three cases

To understand a multitude of different initiatives, we chose to use three different cases of perceived failed initiatives that varied in their characteristics (in terms of location, goals, group composition, and relationship with government). The first case is a citizens’ initiative that aimed to combine several facilities and services into one area in a village. The process started with one of the sports clubs, the soccer club, being in need of new changing rooms. Given the context of depopulation in the region and the village, a group of residents saw an opportunity and made plans to
combine several services and facilities within the village. The services and facilities were all already situated within the village, but they required renovation and would preferably be located in the same central location. The idea behind this combination of facilities was to reduce overall costs and thus maintain these services by sharing the building and related costs, and above all, to keep them affordable when member numbers start to decline.

The initiators were very ambitious in their plans and aimed to combine many services and facilities. The services and facilities were mostly connected to the sports associations in the village that needed to renovate their current accommodations, namely the soccer facilities, the swimming pool and the court tennis club. Additionally, the existing multifunctional accommodation was in need of a renovation and was included in the plans for the new building. The new building and surrounding fields would also accommodate the tennis club and snooker club and serve as a central canteen for all the associations. Additionally, cultural associations, such as music associations, were to be accommodated within the building. Lastly, the building would serve as a central meeting point for the village, and halls could be rented for computer courses for the elderly or for youth gatherings, for example. In the following, this case will be referred to as the multifunctional accommodation initiative.

The multifunctional accommodation initiative started to gather funding after the group and its ideas had taken shape. Initially the local government was approached for funding. The local government was positive about the plans but informed the initiators at an early stage that it would not be able to provide financial support. The group of initiators therefore approached the regional government, which was also positive about the plans. Nevertheless, because financial support for the initiative would include regional financial means, the regional government requested that a regional vision and approach be included within the plans. The initiators wanted to meet these additional requirements for a regional approach. One element of the requirement for the regional vision was the commitment of the surrounding villages because (financial) support for the services and facilities in the village where the initiative was situated would also mean the end of support and eventually the end of the services and facilities in the other villages, a result of depopulation and a lack of government funds to support all services. Therefore, a discussion began among inhabitants of the initiative’s village and the surrounding villages regarding which services and facilities had to remain at which location and which villages would (in the longer term) lose certain services and facilities. Ultimately, the villages were not able to reach an agreement on the division of services and facilities, so the initiative did not secure a regional commitment from the surrounding villages. This lack of commitment resulted in the failure of the initiative because the regional government argued that they could not provide the financial support needed. During the data-collection process, this was the status quo: developed plans but a lack of financial and political support.
The second case involves the prevention of the demolition of social houses and the establishment of a housing cooperative. A social housing corporation communicated that 22 houses within a village were scheduled for demolition because of expected population decline and the poor condition of the houses. This announcement led to a protest by inhabitants of the village, especially on the street where the demolition was planned because the inhabitants were very dissatisfied with this decision. A town meeting was organised, during which the citizens’ initiative was created. The citizens’ initiative wanted to provide an alternative to safeguard affordable social housing for their village and to prevent open spaces from developing on their street. This initiative will be referred to as the housing cooperative initiative.

With the start of the housing cooperative initiative, negotiations began among the initiators, the housing corporation at the forefront and, further in the background, the local government. The interests of the different stakeholders were in opposition, with the initiative wanting to safeguard the houses and the corporation and local government wanting to demolish them because of their poor condition and the predicted decline in future residents, given the context of depopulation. The initiators developed several plans to prevent demolition, which went back and forth between the initiators and the corporation. One of the options was a housing cooperative. At first, the corporation and the local government did not support this plan because they did not want to place (more) houses of poor quality on the rental market and burden the cooperative with the costs of renovation. Furthermore, the existing housing quotas (‘contingenten’ in Dutch) prescribe demolition of deteriorated houses within areas that expect population decline. Nevertheless, the corporation later did see the possibilities of launching a social housing cooperative with a cooperative plan and became legally obligated to financially facilitate the start of that plan (because of new legislation: Woningwet 2018). Therefore, the housing corporation wanted to provide the opportunity for a pilot but set one condition for this pilot: it would only include the safeguarding of six houses instead of all 22 houses scheduled for demolition. These six houses were in the best condition compared to the others and thus required smaller investments in renovation.

In this process of negotiating and forming plans, the relationships between the initiators on the one side and the institutions on the other side deteriorated. There was a lack of trust between these stakeholders, and the initiators felt that they were being obstructed by the housing corporation because of the limited options for alternatives. Additionally, the corporation’s communication with the initiators was experienced as negative, while at the same time, the corporation felt that they were sometimes kept in the dark.

The housing cooperative initiative stalled during the process of building the cooperative plan. The initiators did not trust the housing cooperative to be viable when it would only include six houses; they saw potential risks in the event of a default. However, the housing corporation and the local government were bound
by the housing quotas, which did not allow safeguarding more houses for the cooperative. Furthermore, the high level of distrust between the initiators and the housing corporation had increased, damaging the relationships and negotiations. At the time of the data collection, the initiators were considering what the best possible outcome could be for their neighbourhood and village.

The third case is a citizens’ initiative focusing on sustainable energy and liveability, including several villages in one of the above-mentioned provinces. By starting an energy cooperative, a group of inhabitants of these villages wanted to create revenue that could be invested in improving the liveability of their villages. The energy cooperative was meant to generate sustainable energy with solar panel fields, for example, for its members within the region. This initiative will be referred to as the energy cooperative initiative.

The energy cooperative initiative started during a village meeting among citizens. A group of initiators was formed, and they involved people from other villages as well. Several ideas for sustainable energy were formulated in working groups, and one of the working groups focused on high-speed internet and split off from the initiative to work on that idea. With this split, many active members of the initiative continued by only contributing to the high-speed internet branch of the initiative because of the investment of time it required and because this branch of the initiative had already produced concrete results. The working groups on sustainable energy continued but struggled to attract the required funding, and at first their ideas existed only on paper.

As a result, it was difficult to attract members who wanted the energy cooperative to be their energy supplier, and to attract members for the initiative in itself. A vicious cycle developed in which people left the initiative instead of producing concrete ideas and results. Additionally, plans for wind turbines in one of the participating villages led to some inhabitants no longer wanting to contribute to a sustainable society in general or to the energy cooperative in particular. The decision about the placement of wind turbines led to so much conflict within the region that cooperation on sustainable energy was no longer possible among the residents. Therefore, the funds that had been secured in the meantime were returned. At the time of data collection, the initiative still existed, but in a hibernating state, awaiting potential new plans in the future because it was no longer active at that point.

Thus far, none of the cases have succeeded in their plans, yet there is still some activity within all of them. Despite still being slightly active, all initiatives are perceived as failed because, according to the respondents, their initiatives were not successful and they are unsure whether future success is possible. Nevertheless, the end-points of the cases are unclear because, within each one, opportunities for continuation in alternative forms are still being explored or there is a less active search for opportunities, and the door remains open for the future. Meier (2018)
also revealed that there is often no clear end-point for what she refers to as challenged initiatives.

5.3.3 Data collection and analysis

Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with participants of the citizens’ initiatives and with the involved professionals during the period from February to September 2017 (see table 1 for the number of interviews per case). Using a semi-structured interview protocol, open questions were asked about the way the initiative evolved, which processes took place and how and why the initiators perceived the initiative as a failure. External professionals involved with the initiative were able to illustrate these processes from an institutional perspective. Nevertheless, the perceived failure was experienced by the initiators, not necessarily by the professionals.

Each interview covered the status of the initiative at the time of the interview, the opinion of the participant about who was responsible for the initiative and its failure and whether the failure could have been prevented. The interviews took one to two hours. Additionally, the websites of the cases and additional documents and information provided by the initiators, such as presentations and minutes of meetings, were used for the analysis.

Using the qualitative data analysis software package Atlas.ti, the transcribed interviews were coded and analysed. During the analysis, fragments of the interviews were coded; these fragments described the steps and achievements of the initiative, the causes of failure, the reflections of the participants on the process and the role of other participants and institutions. The most prominent code themes, which surfaced during the analysis, were related to the process of the initiative, the consequences of stopping, the motivation of the participants, the effects of the initiative within the village and the skills of the members of the initiative.

Before the interviews started, the participants were informed about how the information they provided would be used and, upon agreement, the participants signed to indicate their consent. To ensure as much disclosure as possible on potentially sensitive topics, the participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity in the proceedings. Therefore, in the description of the cases and the results, markers of identity are removed, and pseudonyms are used to refer to the individual participants. The following results section will reveal which processes and factors contributed to the current situations of failure.
Table 1: Number of interviews per case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Initiators</th>
<th>Professionals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multifunctional accommodation initiative</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing cooperative initiative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy cooperative initiative</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4 Results

The data analysis revealed the processes that led to the perceived failure of the citizens’ initiatives. Analysing failure as a process reveals not only individual factors that contribute to failure but also the relationships among these factors. With this process-based approach, the data reveal how some of the aspects identified in the literature review (not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government and existing and changing policy) indeed play a role in the process of perceived failure. Additionally, new obstacles within the failure process emerge from the analysis.

Based on the interview data, three themes surfaced related to the processes of perceived failure. The theoretical aspects can be placed within these three themes and will be discussed accordingly. The first theme, interactions with governments and institutions, refers to differences in pace between (government) institutions and the initiatives; these differences stem from differences in attitude, the timing of decision-making and the pace that is preferred. Within the theme of interactions with governments and institutions, the obstacles relationship with government, existing and changing policy and insufficient financial means are included. The second theme is appropriation, which includes senses of both ownership and responsibility. The scale and non-representation of a community of citizens are aspects from theory that are included within the appropriation theme because the cases aim to take ownership of local public space and do so with community support. The third theme is the personal investment initiators make regarding their own status and reputation. Volunteer burnout is also part of the third theme. The three themes will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

5.4.1 Interactions with governments and institutions

Within all three cases, interactions with the government and related (semi-governmental) institutions, such as the housing corporation for the housing cooperative initiative, played an important role in the process. The interactions were perceived as complicated and troubled. This perception can partly be explained by a difference in the pace and attitudes of official institutions and the initiative. The difference in pace and attitude was not necessarily dominated by not fitting into existing policy, as was expected from the literature (van Dam et al. 2015; Li et al. 2016). Where initiatives want to move as quickly as possible, governments and housing corporations are structured and limited by legislation and procedures,
even though the plans of the initiatives align with existing policy. Both governments and housing corporations are institutionalized and therefore limited in their scope of action; they cannot act and respond as freely as an individual could. However, the pace of government officials also differs because they are not responsible in the end for the outcomes of the initiative, roles differ and interests can be opposite of the interests of initiators (Beer 2014; Edelenbos et al. 2017). This pace and attitude mismatch surfaces within all three cases and is caused by the different structures and contexts in which initiatives and local governments operate. The quote below, from Lisa, illustrates such a mismatch for the housing cooperative initiative and shows how her initiative was not able to follow and decide on its own pace.

Lisa – initiator – housing cooperative initiative

‘[…] and then you start to think, you want to do things, but you want to organize things at your own pace. That should be possible, but when it is not, you just have to go on. […] The pressure was high, the pressure of the housing corporation was high. […] And that has been the biggest struggle for this initiative. Because of the pressure of the housing corporation, it never felt right, and that influences the entire initiative. You can’t decide your own tempo for your plans.’

Another difference in pace and attitude emerges in the multifunctional accommodation initiative. This initiative followed the instructions given by local and regional government, but the instructions and requests continued to increase and change. The initiators felt that the rules of the game were being changed while the game was being played. A similar trend can be observed within broadband initiatives, where new policies determining the course of action did not take into account initiatives that were already in process (Salemink & Strijker 2018). Jake, one of the initiators of the multifunctional accommodation case, illustrates in the following quote how they tried to follow the pace of the local and regional government by meeting those stakeholders’ requests. However, because the requests continued to change, the initiators were eventually no longer able to execute them, illustrating how the performative effect of policy described by van Dam et al. (2015) did not come into existence.

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

‘It could have been prevented, but that is political. […] You are lobbying, you are in the backrooms, and you have the feeling that everything will turn out okay. But then there comes another demand. At some point there was this demand, we had a go from the regional government official, who thought it was a great plan and we could work out the details and look in the surrounding areas, so we do that. We had to start [a new project] and that is where it went wrong.'
Not that it was wrong in itself, I think, the idea was rather good. […] It is just that they made it more and more difficult for us, or well, they kept on asking more of us, support of many people around us and the villages around us. We were, I think, too quick with our response. We should have focused on a single thing.’

The pace mismatch ultimately resulted in the multifunctional accommodation initiative not receiving political support and therefore not receiving the necessary financial support. Insufficient financial means thus play a role in the theme of interactions with government because these interactions have consequences for funding decisions by politics. A very similar process took place within the housing cooperative initiative, where the plans did not receive the needed support of the housing corporations and local government and the initiative therefore lost the ability to attract the necessary funding. The energy cooperative initiative did succeed in attaining initial funding, but because of interactions with the local and regional governments, who decided where to place the wind turbines and thus created conflict and resistance within the community, the funds were returned.

Furthermore, the data reveal that momentum is needed to achieve concrete results and attract people who want to contribute. To optimally use momentum, the initiators wanted to move quickly, a difference of pace compared to the government. In particular, the energy cooperative initiative struggled to maintain momentum. The split-off of one of the branches that was successful used its momentum and benefitted from it, but that had a negative effect on the momentum of the other branch of the energy cooperative initiative. In the following quote, Robert explains how the loss of momentum had a negative effect on the energy cooperative initiative.

Robert – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

‘You start enthusiastically with something and you have many ideas. You think wow, we should do this together. And then it takes too long before you actually realize something, for whatever reason. We had eight board members and were pulling all kinds of strings, but still people drop out. There was no result. Show me something, before I decide whether I can contribute. It does not work when there is no enthusiastic group and it all comes down to a few individuals who have too little time.’

As noted earlier, the pace of local government can be slowed down because it is structured by formal procedures, and local governments have a certain response time to handle requests, such as for funding (Edelenbos et al. 2016; Edelenbos et al. 2017; Van Meerkerk et al. 2013). On the side of the initiatives, the pace is determined by the urgency of the goal and the motivations of the group of
initiators to create momentum. Pressing matters need to be addressed quickly, and achieving results will attract more people and set everything in motion. The initiatives and the local governments experience different workload peaks, and the peaks do not occur simultaneously. For instance, in the multifunctional accommodation case, the pace was determined by the need of the soccer club to renovate their changing rooms. This situation required a faster pace than the local and regional government – and the surrounding villages – could follow. Quentin, a local government official, stresses the importance of taking the time for these types of processes, which did not occur in the multifunctional accommodation case.

_Quentin – local government official – multifunctional accommodation case_

‘When people have to give in, villages have to give in, whether it is a school or whether it is sharing facilities, it is a painful process. The process is painful, but once the facilities are gone and are elsewhere with high quality and functioning well, then you forget about it quickly. You forget it. But that process, that is painful. And you should take your time for it. And I think, that that has been the mistake, we put too much responsibility on the shoulders of [the village].’

Quentin illustrates that different interests, structured by different paces and attitudes, resulted in the failure of the multifunctional accommodation case. He also highlights how the responsibility of structuring and matching these differences for a successful outcome is too much for initiators to bear. Moreover, the consequences of the mismatch of paces and attitudes are borne by the initiators on a personal level and by the inhabitants on a village level. A similar observation, where citizens bear the risks of initiatives not succeeding, was made in a study on rural broadband initiatives (Salemink & Strijker 2018). Ownership of risks and of the initiative itself relates to the second theme, appropriation of the citizens’ initiative.

### 5.4.2 Appropriation

The matter of appropriation is an interesting subject. Appropriation is characterized by senses of ownership, responsibility for the citizens’ initiative and social-spatial aspects. As stated in the previous section, the initiators and inhabitants of the involved villages bear the consequences of not succeeding, while at the same time, it seems that the process of the initiative is a shared responsibility among initiators and government. The following quote from Steven illustrates the interdependence between initiatives and local or regional government (an interdependence also found by Salemink & Strijker (2016)), and thus, how both feel a responsibility for the process.
Steven – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

‘There is a certain power, even when you do things right, they can still shut you down in a way. [Interviewer: you mean the government?]

The regional government. So, as a citizen it is difficult, you do need a few people who are on your side. [...] At different times you can see that, even when you think that you have everything in order, you are still subject to the randomness of the government [...] and there is a huge civil service bureaucracy opposite of you which is hard to compete with. You need very thick skin.’

Steven describes the complex dependency of the initiative on the government. Because of this dependency, it can be difficult to appropriate an initiative when both initiatives and governments have responsibilities and when there is a difference in power over the initiative. This dependence and the randomness of the government, as Steven refers to it, can be a barrier to the appropriation of an initiative.

When discussing the failure of the initiatives, the respondents all said they did not feel responsible for the failure because they had done everything in their power. Therefore, the initiators feel that they have fulfilled their part of the responsibility and are not responsible for the process failing. The quote from Lisa, below, describes how she does not feel responsible for the failure of the housing cooperative initiative.

Lisa – initiator – housing cooperative initiative

‘I think the only thing we could have done differently was doing less, stopping with all of it. And probably that would have saved us from much frustration too. On the other hand, I think that would not have done right by the desires of the village. Now, at least, and we know that as initiators, we have taken it thus far that we simply cannot get any further. [...]’

[Interviewer: do you feel responsible for this result?]

No. No. No. No. There are mostly institutional obstacles. And if you look at the stakeholders and the different interests, I think the chances of succeeding are down to zero to ten percent. So anything positive following from this is a win.’

Within the theme of appropriation, social-spatial aspects also play a role in the sense of ownership of collectively owned places. Villagers want to do something for their residential environments; they want to improve them according to their needs and desires. Accordingly, they appropriate places on a local level. At the same time, local and regional governments have and make plans for residential
environments on a larger scale and appropriate place on a regional level. The following quote from Leo shows how the regional decision to place wind turbines in a certain location influenced the energy cooperative initiative at the local level. Angry feelings and feelings of incomprehension got in the way of the initiative because initiators and villagers could not decide on the use of (and thus could not appropriate) the collective space of their village, and therefore they no longer wanted to contribute to sustainability.

_Leo – initiator – energy cooperative initiative_

‘You’d say there would be a follow-up. But the whole situation around those wind turbines shut everything down. I cannot show up at someone’s doorstep and ask them to do something for me. […] They just tell me that they no longer want to do anything.’

We also observed the role of social-spatial aspects of appropriation in the other two cases. For the multifunctional accommodation case and for the housing cooperative case, this was the main reason for their perceived failure: the initiatives were bounded by regional-level policy, making it impossible for them to take control of their residential environment at the local level.

 Appropriation of place relates to representation by the citizens’ initiatives. When the group of citizens who takes control over a place represents the interests of the community, the citizens’ initiatives can be perceived as more legitimate. Not being representative of the interests of the community, and thus not having legitimacy, was identified within the literature as a potential obstacle to citizens’ initiatives (Edelenbos et al. 2016; Tonkens & Verhoeven 2018). We observed that representation in these cases is less about having a representative group composition (i.e., a balanced representation of all community groups within the initiative) than it is about support for the initiative’s goal and the goal being supported by the community (i.e., without groups opposing the goal). For example, the housing cooperative initiative merely comprised initiators whose houses were not on the list for demolition, thus not representing all groups within the community equally. However, representation revolves around the interests of the people living on the street and in the villages. The initiators represent their interest, and this interest is broadly supported within the community. Nevertheless, in this case, representation was not found to be of great importance in the process of perceived failure. This finding can be explained by the development phase that the cases had reached. It seems that the initiatives had progressed to such an extent that the matter of representing the community, as a means of gaining legitimacy, had already taken place. Therefore, the initiatives could continue with their activities but still became stalled on different issues.
The motivation of the initiators to deploy the initiative, and thus appropriate both place and the initiative, seemed to be inexhaustible in all the cases. Only when they felt there were no options left, and after many setbacks, did their motivation to continue decline. This is not surprising when we consider that the initiators began their actions on behalf of their own places. Jennifer exemplifies why she was – and still is – motivated to join the housing cooperative initiative.

Jennifer – initiator – housing cooperative initiative

‘I am prepared to continue. To what extent and for how long, I am not sure yet. I am perseverant and a very tough person. I don’t give up easily. [...] I know this about myself and that is why I thought I was suitable for the job. Let me join. And I enjoy it too. And it is not only fun. But to stand up for people who can’t do it themselves [...], as an outsider it is easier.’

Jennifer’s perspective also explains why an initiative’s end-points are unclear: new possibilities for making the residential environment more compatible with the initiators’ needs and desires are always explored because of the motivation of the initiators and the interest they have in adapting ‘their’ place. At the same time, this interest explains why initiatives do not look beyond the local level of their plans, in contrast to governments that operate at the regional level and by doing so also complicate the initiative’s interactions with governments.

5.4.3 Personal investment

People who are active within a citizens’ initiative invest personal resources in the initiative (Healey 2011; Wiseman 2006; WRR 2012). The data reveal that first, the initiators invest a large amount of their time into the initiative; in some instances their involvement is comparable to a full-time job. Furthermore, the initiators invest in the initiative with their skills, knowledge and networks. In all cases, we observed that the levels of knowledge, networks and skills present was probably sufficient, and where it was lacking, external advice from a professional was used, indicating that success would be likely. Nonetheless, it seems that, especially for the multifunctional accommodation and housing cooperative cases, the initiators’ lacked the skills necessary to play the political game. The political game is partly composed of the opposing interests of local and regional governments, where local governments are in need of active citizens. However, this need can lead to inequality and to the regional government aiming to prevent inequality among regions but therefore not being able to support local initiatives. The multifunctional accommodation and housing cooperative cases were not able to obtain political support for their plans and thus they could not obtain funding. Jake explains this role of politics in the following quote.
Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

‘You need each other. [...] the initiative is at the provincial level, at municipal grounds, so local politics is included as well. And when that does not come to a higher level, policy wise, with the local and regional political colours, which differ… You need people who can unite that, you need those people a lot. We did not really have those people, I think. We had our networks and our relations, but politically speaking, we fell short. We really fell short. We tried our very best, and two really played their parts well, but politically we fell short.’

The investment of skills, knowledge and time can put a strain on initiators, ultimately leading to volunteer burnout. In the literature, volunteer burnout was described as a factor that can lead to the failure of citizens’ initiatives (Allen & Mueller 2013; Salemink & Strijker 2016). Remarkably, we found that, indeed, much was asked of the initiators in terms of skills, knowledge and time, but no signs of volunteer burnout were present. The opposite seemed to be true: even though the initiators made large personal investments into the initiative, their motivation did not decrease, as illustrated previously.

In addition to investing their skills, knowledge and time, the initiators also make a personal investment by affiliating themselves with the initiative. They represent a larger group, and by doing so, they invest their own reputation and status. The investment of reputation and status carries risks for the participants as well. When things go wrong, their reputation and status are damaged. Preventing this social damage could be another explanation for the unclear end-points of struggling initiatives. For the multifunctional accommodation initiative, this risk of social damage played an essential role and led to initiators saying that they no longer wanted to put their good reputation at risk because they needed to protect their professional careers. Jake, initiator of the multifunctional accommodation initiative, highlighted this during the interview.

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

‘We said to each other, we quit lobbying. It will cost us our credibility. Look, I am retired, my resume is completed. [...] But the others, they are still working on their resume. [...] Those people are daily at the local and regional governments, and we needed those networks. But their credibility would be ruined. So we said, we have to be sensible and this was it.’

The obstacles experienced by citizens’ initiatives, related to pace, appropriation and personal investments, lead to the perceived failure of the cases and illustrate which processes take place in the perceived failure of citizens’ initiatives. Following the conclusion in the final section below, the findings will be discussed.
5.5 Conclusion

Depopulation in rural areas has increased the interest in and relevance of citizens’ initiatives as an alternative mode of service provision. The existing body of literature mainly focuses on successful citizens’ initiatives, leaving the processes of failure under-researched (Meijer 2017). The current study aimed to answer the following research question: How can the processes of failure of citizens’ initiatives be described and explained? In this paper, the processes that take place in citizens’ initiatives that lead to their perceived failure have been explored using a case-study approach. The viewpoints of initiators and government officials regarding the process of failure were included in the analysis. Following the literature review, six obstacles were identified that may contribute to the failure of citizens’ initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government, and existing policy. Insights into how these and potential additional obstacles are interrelated have been provided, and the perspective adopted here sees failure as a process. Based on the case study data, three themes surfaced that illustrate the perceived process of failure: interactions with governments and institutions, appropriation and personal investment. Within these three themes, theoretical aspects and additional influences were described. It appeared that the ‘interactions with governments and institutions’ and the ‘appropriation’ themes have a particularly strong influence on the process of failure because these themes emerged most dominantly within all three cases. The ‘personal investment’ theme was also part of the failure process within all three cases, but to a somewhat smaller extent.

The ‘interactions with governments and institutions’ theme indicated how transferring responsibilities can lead to mismatches in several areas and thus contribute to perceived failure. The interactions between citizens’ initiatives and governments appeared to be troubled because of policies, i.e., a government being constrained by policies or a citizens’ initiative with plans that do not align with existing policies (Bisschops & Beunen 2018; Li et al. 2016; Nederhand et al. 2016). Differences in pace and attitude, loss of momentum and insufficient financial means are also part of the process, and all can lead to troubled interactions. In particular, the perceived failure of the multifunctional accommodation initiative was dominated by the processes that fall within this theme.

Within the ‘appropriation’ theme, the process of how initiators want to appropriate collectively owned places and take responsibility for an initiative was highlighted. Despite governments also being responsible to a certain extent, governments and initiators do not experience the initiative goals as a shared responsibility. Responsibilities overlap even though interests can be opposed to each other. This combination of overlap and opposition can result in the initiators not being able to appropriate the initiative and ultimately contributes to the perceived failure of the initiative. Barriers within the process of appropriation were identified as well, including the randomness and the non-transparency of the government.
The last theme, ‘personal investment’, illustrated the effort initiators put into their initiatives and how this relates to the process of failure. The initiators’ identification with their place of residence is strong, and initiators are willing to make large investments in the initiative via their involvement and perseverance. One of the obstacles identified in the literature, volunteer burnout, seemed not to be an obstacle in our cases. The initiators invest much of their time, knowledge, networks and skills, but they do not seem to be overburdened. The obstacle that we do note is potential damage to the reputation of the initiators when things go wrong. This social damage can be related to the smaller scale and rural setting in which the initiatives operate, given the relatively close ties and higher levels of social control that exist in such settings. At the same time, the close ties could function as a safety net that prevents volunteer burnout, potentially explaining the lack of volunteer burnout in our cases. Nevertheless, the personal investment of initiators deserves recognition. After an initiative fails, the same initiators can decide to entirely quit their efforts for the community as well as for other initiatives (Salemink 2016). Citizens’ initiatives can play a vital role in renewed service provision in depopulating rural areas, but their social role should be kept in mind at the same time, and opportunities to develop the initiative in the way the initiators intend should be provided.

Within all three themes, we see that the process of perceived failure is dominated by a discrepancy of scale. Citizens’ initiatives are concrete projects that operate at the local scale. Local inhabitants feel responsible, and their private reputation in the village is involved. Initiatives need to be able to optimally use momentum to realize their goals, but this contrasts with how government institutions function. Governments operate at the regional scale and are less concrete in their policies, plans and regulations. Government officials are professionally involved, mostly in an advisory role. Governments operate at a different pace, which can result in a loss of momentum for citizens’ initiatives and in this way contributes to the process of perceived failure.

The relationship between governments, citizens’ initiatives and policies has been discussed throughout this study. Citizens’ initiatives are often described as a potential alternative for the public provision of facilities and services (Brannan et al. 2006; Cheshire & Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones & Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Thiede et al. 2017), and as such, as an alternative to existing policies. It should also be taken into account that citizens’ initiatives, in their particular contexts, are an established fact for governments and institutions, functioning as an alternative to existing policies. As such, citizens’ initiatives require adaptation from governments and institutions, instead of the other way around, i.e., by forcing citizens to align with existing policies. Governments should and can adopt a role of evolving towards facilitating these initiatives in the necessary ways. A one-size-fits-all approach departing from existing policy does not suit these unique initiatives, which require tailor-made and context-specific support. Expecting citizens’ initiatives to conform to existing policies seems to be contradictory: serving as an
alternative to existing policy cannot entail simultaneously aligning with that same policy.
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