Citizens’ Initiatives in depopulating rural areas

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Conclusion
6.1 Introduction

The underlying aim of this thesis has been to add to the knowledge base and to develop a deeper understanding of citizens’ initiatives in depopulating rural areas in the Netherlands. Here, citizens’ initiatives are defined as formally or informally organised groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain on a voluntary basis without financial compensation. Briefly stated, they refer to citizens who voluntarily contribute to the public domain. The process of involving citizens’ initiatives and their assumption of responsibilities relating to service delivery and liveability was found to be complex, entailing varying and, at times, opposing interests of the concerned stakeholders. The depopulated rural context constituted the research setting, given that alternative providers of services and facilities may be located at greater distances from rural communities, thus increasing the relevance of citizens’ initiatives. In addition, societal changes such as ageing, shifting consumption demands, austerity measures and an expansion of scale can have a stronger impact on rural depopulating areas (Copus et al. 2011; Skerratt 2010; Steiner & Atterton 2014; Woods 2006).

The emphasis in this study was on the perspectives and experiences of various stakeholders such as initiators, local and regional government officials and other professionals. Accordingly, the study addressed the main research question, namely: ‘How can citizens’ initiatives be described and understood in terms of success, failure and continuity in its local context of depopulation in rural areas?’ In Chapter 2, professionals’ perspectives on success were explored, while those of the initiators were examined in Chapter 3. A further line of inquiry focused on factors that influence the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives. Apart from success, the continuity of citizens’ initiatives, and how the concept of continuity can be understood, were explored in Chapter 4. Lastly, focus has been on the process of perceived failure in Chapter 5, from the perspectives of several stakeholders.

The next section (6.2) of this concluding chapter presents a summary of the main research findings in relation to the research questions presented in Chapter 1. Subsequently, in section 6.3, the wider implications of the findings are considered and discussed. Next, some concluding thoughts on the role of citizens’ initiatives in depopulating rural areas are offered in section 6.4. In the final section (6.5), some policy implications that follow from the study’s findings are presented.

6.2 Main findings

In Chapter 2, an attempt was made to answer the study’s first research question: How can the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives be defined? Professionals and local and regional government officials shared their visions on the concepts of success and failure of citizens’ initiatives during focus group discussions. A three-level theoretical framework for understanding how stakeholders conceptualized success
was constructed based on a review of the literature. These three levels at which the effectiveness of citizens’ initiatives was examined are the community, networks, and organization or participant level. Effectiveness at the community level relates to the output of an initiative and therefore its contribution to the community. At the network level, effectiveness is associated with the sustainability of a network, requiring the pre-establishment of inter-organizational relationships. Finally, at the organisation or participant level, effectiveness refers to how participation within a citizens’ initiative is expected to benefit the members. To be considered successful, citizens’ initiatives should demonstrate effectiveness at each of these three levels.

The perspectives of the professionals revealed a somewhat paternalistic view regarding successful citizens’ initiatives. Remarkably, an emphasis on the achievement of project goals, which is related to output and effectiveness at the community level, was not emphasized in this perspective. Rather, an initiative was perceived as successful as long as citizens remained continuously active and in charge. Evidently, professionals focus mostly on the process of citizens’ initiatives and consequently on the organization or participant level of effectiveness. This finding seems remarkable because of the expectations surrounding citizens’ initiatives related to the ‘ participation society’, such as providing services in areas where their provision or continuity is lacking. However, these results did not support a focus on success in terms of effectiveness at the community level, that is, goal achievement and thus service provision and maintenance. Moreover, from the standpoint of the initiators a differing view was expected, namely placing more focus and value on goal achievement.

This thesis has also shed light on the perspectives of initiators. Thus, in Chapter 3, RQ 1 as well as RQ 2 (which factors contribute to success and failure of citizens’ initiatives?) were addressed from the perspective of initiators. To answer both questions, a questionnaire was administered among citizens’ initiatives. In total, 157 completed questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 26.8%). A principal component analysis conducted on the questionnaire data revealed that the initiators define the success of citizens’ initiatives at all three levels: the community, network, and organization levels. An in-depth examination revealed that goal achievement was perceived as an important aspect of success; hence, success was related to community-level effectiveness. In general, the initiators indicated that achieving goals was an important dimension of successful citizens’ initiatives, particularly with regard to their own initiatives. It should be noted that goals are not fixed entities; they can shift and change over time within one initiative. Thus, not achieving an initial goal could still result in a successful outcome for the initiative in the longer term.

In Chapter 3, the factors perceived by initiators as contributing to the success and failure of their initiatives were identified. A review of the literature revealed that previous studies have focused primarily on success factors and have identified the following four categories of success factors: the characteristics of the initiative,
functional success, social relations and inputs. The questionnaire allowed for the inclusion of a fifth category in which the initiators could provide other factors that had not previously been identified in the literature, but that they had experienced as influencing the success of their initiatives. The results of the regression analysis conducted on the questionnaire data indicated that the initiators experienced success and failure factors belonging to all four of the categories, with the exception of social relations. Success is influenced by an initiative’s characteristics, such as group size, the developmental phase and communication levels and inputs, that is, their relationships with governments, such as involvement for funding. The suggestions of the respondents revealed two failure factors: lack of funds and disappointing interactions with governments. From the standpoint of functional success, the most important factor influencing success was the extent to which goals had been achieved to date. This indicates the strong dependence of success on goal achievement, as perceived by the initiators.

A further question addressed in Chapter 4 was that of the continuity of citizens’ initiatives, that is, factors influencing the continuity of citizens’ initiatives. Continuity can be examined at three different levels: the participant, group and initiative levels. At the participant level, continuity refers to the continuous involvement of individual members of the initiative. A group of initiators can also be characterized as continuous if the group remains stable and none of its members withdraws their participation. This is referred to as group-level continuity. Continuity at the initiative level refers to continuity at a higher level than the continuity of the individual members or of the entire group of initiators. An initiative can be considered continuous when it exists over time, irrespective of possible changes within the group’s composition, until the time that the goal is achieved. This type of continuity extends to the maintenance that is associated with certain goals, such as managing personnel and the upkeep of a store relating to the goal of establishing a supermarket.

The conclusion that emerged from an analysis of the data derived from the questionnaires was that the most prominent level of continuity occurred at the level of the initiative, that is, continuity until the goal of the initiative is achieved. Once goals are achieved, initiatives are perceived as being more successful and more likely to continue. Furthermore, the expectation that success is a condition for continuity was not supported by the findings because the level of success was not one of the factors influencing continuity. The findings illustrate that continuity is not strongly dependent on the dropping-out of individual initiators or of the entire group of initiators. Given the assumption of the fragility of citizens’ initiatives, considered as an alternative in service provision within the ‘participation society’, this finding appears promising.

Finally, a response to RQ 4 on processes that contribute to the failure of citizens’ initiatives was provided in Chapter 5. Rather than focusing on separate failure factors, an integral approach was adopted in which failure was considered as a process
comprising an interplay of several factors. A review of the literature led to the identification of six potential obstacles encountered by citizens’ initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale issues, insufficient financial means, the relationship with the government and existing and changing policies. Three case studies of ‘failed’ citizens’ initiatives were conducted that included the perspectives of the initiators of the failed initiatives as well as professionals involved with these initiatives wherever possible. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the failure processes within these cases: (1) interactions with governments and institutions, (2) appropriation and (3) personal investments. The analysis revealed that in relation to the first theme, shifting responsibilities lead to several types of mismatches regarding issues such as pace and momentum, contributing to perceptions of failure. Findings relating to the second theme of appropriation indicated that initiators were not always able to appropriate their initiative because, although responsibilities are shared with governments, the interests of both parties could be opposed. The findings relating to the final theme of personal investment illustrated the areas in which initiators invested efforts in their initiatives. Despite the fact that personal investments were often considerable, volunteer burnout did not emerge as an issue in these case studies. The downsides of personal investment, such as reputational damage or complete cessation of community participation, were also identified in this chapter and an argument was presented for minimalizing the risk of social damage. A predominant aspect of the process of failure appeared to be the scale discrepancy, with citizens’ initiatives operating at the local level but interacting with governments and institutions operating at higher levels.

6.3 Citizens’ initiatives in the participation society

6.3.1 Perspectives on success, failure and continuity

Existing studies on citizens’ initiatives have rarely attempted to conceptualize success and failure. By contrast, both of these terms were explored and analysed from different perspectives (i.e., by professionals, local/regional government officials and initiators) in this study. Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated that success and failure are nuanced rather than clear-cut concepts, evidencing unclear boundaries and entailing significant differences in perspectives. However, a finding of this study was that professionals demonstrated a somewhat paternalistic view of the success of citizens’ initiatives. Whereas it had been assumed that initiators would strongly contest this view, in fact, they also valued learning opportunities generated by the process while simultaneously including aspects of other levels of success in their conceptualization. Goal achievement was influential in initiators’ conceptualization of success in general and especially in relation to their own initiatives.
The significance of goal achievement was highlighted further as it was foregrounded in relation to continuity. Once initiatives create results or their goals are achieved, they are perceived by initiators as being successful and likely to continue. This finding is related to the momentum of citizens’ initiatives. Initiatives must maintain their momentum to be successful. This can be accomplished by reaching the goals of the initiative or other relevant results, for example, the acquisition of sufficient funds. However, it should be borne in mind that different types of continuity exist at the levels of the participant, the group or the initiative as a whole. Moreover, some initiatives, such as a children’s playground that does not require maintenance, do not need to be continued once their goal has been achieved. Therefore, continuity entails different levels of importance for different types of initiatives. In the context of service delivery, it is also necessary to examine which type of initiative, and accordingly which level of continuity, fits with the service or issue being addressed.

Two functions of citizens’ initiatives were identified based on the findings of the study: achieving goals (the initiators’ perspective) and the creation of social cohesion (the professionals’ perspective). These different perspectives on successful citizens’ initiatives have been demonstrated throughout this thesis. The different perspectives on the importance of goal achievement, imply that the perspectives on the function citizens’ initiatives should serve, differ as well. These differing expectations can lead to a troublesome relationship between initiators and professionals (such as governments) because these groups work to achieve different outcomes, and their divergent perspectives can constitute an obstacle constraining the momentum of an initiative. The alignment of the expectations of initiators and professionals regarding citizens’ initiatives could contribute to improving their relationship. However, citizens’ initiatives are an established fact in the sense that they do not follow guidelines or policies but come into existence out of perceived necessity. Therefore, it should be professionals, including governments, who align their expectations with those of the initiators and not the other way around. This would require adaptation and efforts on the part of governments, institutions and professionals towards understanding what the initiatives are about, which will be described in more detail in section 6.5 on policy implications.

6.3.2 Democracy and accessibility

Within welfare states, the task of distributing scarce goods within a specific area to ensure that access to these goods is as equitable as possible has traditionally fallen to governments. In the current timeframe of the ‘participation society’, governments are handing over part of these tasks to citizens. However, whereas citizens do not have an election-based mandate for distributing scarce goods, they are nevertheless invited to take responsibility for service provision within their
living environments, or they assume this responsibility themselves. Service
 provision that is conducted in this manner can become a club good, such that only
members of the initiative, or those who belong to the community, potentially
benefit from their membership. Consequently, inequalities in access to services may
be strengthened, which can impact an entire community (Warner 2011). This shift
also has implications for democratic practices and for the accessibility of services.
Because these services are not primarily distributed by governments, they are not,
by default, equally accessible.

A number of researchers have argued that the participation society leads to changes
in responsibilities and in service provision, requiring new roles for both
governments and citizens, which are not always in effect (Meijer 2018; Meijer
2016). Furthermore, interdependencies among governments and citizens continue
to exist because the initiatives (partially) make use of governmental resources while
remaining accountable and compliant with policies. This interdependency
necessitates the existence of a sound relationship between citizens’ initiatives and
governments. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, this relationship can be
troubled at times. The study’s findings indicate that struggles do not merely follow
from rules and regulations, which are often presented as obstacles for citizens’
initiatives within the literature (Bosworth et al. 2015; Curry 2012; Salemink &
Strijker 2016). In addition, there appear to be two other obstacles that are
constitutive of this troubled relationship: bureaucratic processes and the issue of
scale. Firstly, whereas citizens’ initiatives should be pursued at their own pace,
bureaucratic processes, such as reaching a decision on funding applications or the
reaction terms of a government, can be impediments. Secondly, citizens are often
engaged at a different (lower) scale than that of politics, given that their primary
focus and locus of operation is the local level. However, government officials are
required to tackle issues at the regional level, which is a higher scale than that which
concerns the initiators. In such cases, although their interest is in operating at local
levels, citizens’ initiatives are expected, and at times forced, to conform to regional-
level policies.

The struggles between governments and citizens’ initiatives, however, can also be
understood as more deeply rooted. Governments aim to ensure the equitable
distribution of and access to facilities and services as far as possible. Consequently,
in most cases, they treat citizens’ initiatives equally, applying a one-size-fits-all
policy (van den Broek et al. 2016; Salemink 2016). However, citizens’ initiatives
assume different forms based on their goals (replacing an existing service or facility
or introducing a new one) and their required continuity (maintenance of goals at
the level of the initiative, or not). Thus, each initiative has its own specific needs in
terms of governmental support (de Wilde et al. 2014). Consequently, a one-size-
fits-all approach can stand in the way of the success of initiatives. Moreover,
citizens’ initiatives do not occur in all regions (Skerratt 2010; Skerratt & Steiner
2013). Both of these issues can unintentionally contribute to unequal access to
services for citizens. Tailor-made approaches for the support of citizens’ initiatives
are necessary for initiatives to fulfil a role in service provision. In addition, because self-organizing democracy (Edelenbos et al. 2017) is not fully in place, governments could function as a safeguard in areas where service provision is not taken up through citizens’ initiatives.

6.3.3 Personal investments

The topic of citizens’ investments for achieving fruitful initiatives has recurred throughout this thesis. Citizens invest their time, skills, networks and reputations in their initiatives to contribute to and participate in them. Accordingly, citizens’ initiatives meet the requirements of the ‘participation society’ by actively contributing to their living environments. At the same time, as many studies have shown, citizens are empowered as they have a greater say over their living environments and use their so-called ‘right to challenge’ when they feel that they are better able to provide a service than a government institution (Espejo & Bendek 2011; Jones & Ormston 2014; Steiner & Farmer 2017; Verhoeven & Tonkens 2013). In light of these active contributions on the part of citizens, the issue that arises concerns the level of investment that can be expected from citizens for achieving successful citizens’ initiatives.

Initiators are personally willing to invest in their initiatives. However, when initiatives (have to) fulfil policy-related criteria at the regional level, more is demanded of the initiators in terms of qualities, skills, time and engagement with complexity. Initiators cannot necessarily be expected to operate in the context of regional-level policies, as their initiatives are intended to function at the local level.

The findings of this thesis indicate that increasing demands in terms of time and complexity do not seem to pose an obstacle for initiators. The participants are willing to invest time, and in cases where knowledge or skills are lacking within the initiative, they are able to attract these from outside the initiatives by hiring professionals or obtaining advice. Therefore, volunteer burnout, an obstacle that has been frequently mentioned in the literature (Allen & Mueller 2013; Salemink 2016), did not apply to the case studies analysed in this thesis. However, another risk was identified that has not received attention within the literature so far: social damage.

Social damage occurs when initiatives struggle or fail. As the representatives of the initiative, those who participate in it are the first individuals to be criticized when it fails. The reputations and status of the initiators who invest their efforts in the initiative are thus potentially at risk. Therefore, a reduction in the risk of social damage is required. Whereas the reputations of initiators are important for maintaining their village ties and for preserving their social networks, which can be close-knit within rural communities, they can also be placed at risk in terms of these individuals’ professional careers. An individual’s participation within a
citizens’ initiatives strengthens their *curriculum vitae*. Therefore, an individual’s participation in a citizens’ initiative entails an aspect that relates to their social and professional networks and that can potentially lead to social damage in the event of the initiative’s failure. This can be a reason for initiators to withdraw their participation in an initiative. It can also constrain initiators who are considering joining a citizens’ initiative when they have witnessed failure within the community, or if they were previously part of a failed citizens’ initiative.

6.4 Conclusion

Governments, professionals and initiators have different perspectives on the functions of citizens’ initiatives. These divergent opinions pose an obstacle for the functioning of citizens’ initiatives because the concerned stakeholders differ in their focus and views on prospective outcomes. To bring about the necessary role changes associated with a shift towards the ‘participation society’, it seems that rural citizens’ initiatives in depopulating areas have to fit within the daily practices of institutions. However, it should be the other way around. Citizens’ initiatives are an established fact that require a response from professionals and governments. Therefore, citizens’ initiatives should not be required to fit within the daily practices of institutions; rather, it is up to the institutions to improve their adaptive capacity in relation to citizens’ initiatives in order to include them in their daily practices and policies.

When the concept of the ‘participation society’ was first discussed in the Netherlands, the idea behind citizens’ initiatives was to maintain and enhance liveability. However, studies have shown that the liveability of rural communities is not primarily about the presence of public services or about the activity of participation in itself (Gieling 2018). Social relations are an important aspect of liveability (ibid.). This study supports the perspectives of professionals, which focus more on the process and positive side effects, such as social learning and enhancing networks, and less on goal achievement. However, this perspective is not necessarily aligned with local needs, as citizens’ initiatives respond to local needs by addressing topics that are perceived as urgent or relevant by communities that support them (Bock 2016; Boonstra & Boelens 2011; Healey 2015). Therefore, local and regional governments should attend to the functions and goals of citizens’ initiatives, which are important for the initiators and the community.

Besides the social function of citizens’ initiatives and the function of delivering the service in itself, another function can be thought of as well: serving as a transition towards other forms of service delivery. This transitional status allows for experimentation with different forms of service delivery, such as citizens’ initiatives. Over time, it is possible that other service delivery models may be discovered that are more suitable or that the services disappear entirely. This function seems to apply specifically to depopulating rural areas because of the urgency of
depopulation, which can be a trigger for the launch of citizens’ initiatives in a way that does not occur in metropolitan areas. When citizens’ initiatives are considered as a means for transition, their continuity is of less importance as they may be seen as temporary activities, until a definitive mode of service delivery is established. However, this temporality did not feature in the perspective of the initiators. The question then remains as to which function of citizens’ initiatives is worthwhile for citizens, given that initiators prioritize goal achievement, which is not suited to the functions of enhancing social relations or serving as a transition.

In conclusion, citizens’ initiatives require professionals to understand the functions they intend to fulfill. When considering citizens’ initiatives as a long-term solution for service provision, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that there will be areas in which no initiatives will take place (Salemink & Strijker, 2018; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Therefore, reliance on citizens’ initiatives for service provision may lead to further inequality. However, avoidance of this inequality through top-down service provision is incompatible with the ‘participation society’ and, consequently, with citizens’ initiatives in their current form.

6.5 Policy implications

The shift towards the ‘participation society’ has resulted in a new situation for professionals and government institutions: citizens’ initiatives are emerging in depopulating rural areas, where they strive to achieve their own goals and where they are increasingly claiming a share of governments’ budgets. Governments and professionals need to respond accordingly. This response can entail policy adaptation, shifts in power relations and potential clashes of interests when there are differences in the priorities of citizens and those of local or regional governments. Government officials can become superfluous when the services and facilities for which they were formerly responsible are provided through citizens’ initiatives. In light of the above conclusion, the following five recommendations for policy related to perspectives on and the functions of citizens’ initiatives, are offered: developing a better understanding of the function of citizens’ initiatives, providing a safety net function, communication of limitations and boundaries, minimalizing social damage and a consideration of scale differences. Below, these five recommendations are discussed in more detail.

6.5.1 Developing a better understanding the function of citizens’ initiatives

This thesis has demonstrated that the functions of citizens’ initiatives are understood differently by governments and by initiators. An understanding of the functions of citizens’ initiatives on the part of governments and professionals that is aligned with that of the initiators would facilitate the initiatives. In this case, all of the concerned stakeholders would likely support and share the same goal.
However, this may be difficult to achieve in practice. Interests can be opposed, following from, for example, differences in spatial scales at which initiatives (local) and governments (regional or national) operate. Moreover, members’ interests within an initiative can differ or clash; for example, apart from achieving the goal, some members may hope to create new jobs or income sources. An illustration of how interests can be opposed is when the idea of initiatives serving as a transition can be more appealing for local and regional governments than for initiators. Serious consideration of the objectives of citizens’ initiatives from the initiators’ perspectives by local and regional governments, which evidently occurred in some successful examples, marks a first step in the right direction. This perspective entails a focus on goal achievement and, to a lesser extent, on the positive side effects of citizens’ initiatives. Moreover, when governments follow the pace of citizens’ initiatives, a loss of momentum is avoided and the chances of a successful outcome increase.

6.5.2 Provide a safety net function

The previous recommendation can contribute to greater clarity on the role that these initiatives can play in service provision and enhanced liveability. However, this does not mean that citizens’ initiatives are automatically generated in the places where local and regional governments desire their presence. Moreover, there may be areas remaining where citizens’ initiatives have not occurred at all, leading to inequality among regions. In this case, governments can adopt a safety net function by providing services in these so-called white areas or not-spots (Salemink & Strijker 2018; Skerratt 2010) to ensure that access to services is as equitable as possible.

6.5.3 Communication of limitations and boundaries

Communication of limitations and boundaries relating to legislation or policy at an early stage of the initiative will provide insights into the viability of initiatives. Such insights can help to prevent disappointment among initiators and investments in an initiative that will be unable to operate as planned. However, this communication process is complicated by the fact that in most cases, governments formulate reactive policies following the commencement of initiatives. A tailor-made response to initiatives can facilitate communication of limitations and boundaries, enabling governments to respond more effectively to an individual initiative according to its type, scale and context. This process also relates to following the pace of initiatives. When governments respond to the needs of an initiative (instead of the other way around) and indicate obstacles at an early stage, initiatives are potentially better able to maintain their momentum. Moreover, the feeling among the initiators that the ‘rules change while the game is being played’ does not arise.
6.5.4 Minimalizing social damage

Greater awareness of the potential social damage resulting from the failure of an initiative can also be beneficial for citizens’ initiatives. Social damage can result in the complete cessation of initiators’ participation, including their participation in other initiatives. As such, it can have a deterrent effect on several citizens’ initiatives. Governments can play a role in preventing social damage by creating awareness regarding the social roles of citizens’ initiatives. A focus not only on preventing volunteer burnout but also on minimalizing social damage contributes to the sustained presence of active citizens who want to contribute to the ‘participation society’.

6.5.5 Consideration of scale differences

A final recommendation relates to consideration of the scale at which citizens’ initiatives operate, which can also be beneficial for such initiatives. Local-level operations appear to fit best with citizens’ initiatives within the ‘participation society’. Citizens’ initiatives can provide better oversight at the local level because this is the level of the initiators’ daily experience of their living environment. Operating at the regional level appears to create complications for initiatives, both in terms of relevant policies and regulations as well as in terms of the entailed expansion of scale that extends beyond the scope of the initiators. Cultivating greater awareness of the risks faced by regional-level initiatives and promoting initiatives at the local level can increase the likelihood that they will achieve their goals.
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