Citizens’ Initiatives in depopulating rural areas

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English summary

Introduction

Participation of citizens in the public domain is something of all times. However, in the current context of austerity measures, economic crises, market failure and the phasing out of the welfare state, there is more attention for different forms of participation than before. The Dutch government is striving for a 'participation society' in which citizens have the opportunity and are expected to take on more responsibilities for their living environment. The transition to the 'participation society' is accompanied by changes in role patterns, responsibilities and power relations between citizens and governments.

In the context of the 'participation society', citizens' initiatives can be seen as an alternative to maintaining services that were previously provided by governments and social organizations. Particularly in depopulating areas, citizens' initiatives could contribute to setting up new services or to maintaining services that would otherwise disappear.

In this dissertation I study citizens' initiatives in depopulating areas in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands. The focus here is on the concepts of success, failure and continuity. The perspectives of various stakeholders, such as residents and governments, have a central place in the analyses. The following main question will be dealt with: 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 order to answer this question, the following research questions are addressed:

1. How can the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives be defined?
2. Which factors contribute to the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives?
3. Which factors influence the continuity of citizens’ initiatives?
4. Which processes contribute to the failure of citizens’ initiatives?

Success and the role of achieving concrete goals

In Chapter 2, I investigate how the concepts of 'success' and 'failure' are defined by professionals (research question 1). Based on focus group discussions, professionals, such as local and regional government officials, have given their views on when a citizens' initiative is considered successful or not. This chapter presents a model of success derived from theory that distinguishes success at three different levels: community, network and organisation/participants. Success at the community level relates to the results of an initiative and thus the contribution it makes to the community. At the network level, success means maintaining and expanding relationships with other organisations. Finally, success at the
organisational or participant level refers to the benefits that participating in an initiative brings to the participant. A successful citizens' initiative should be successful at all three levels.

The perspective of the professionals produced a somewhat romantic picture of citizens' initiatives. It is striking that the achievement of the objectives of the initiative is not considered the most important. On the contrary, an initiative is seen as successful by the professionals when the participants are active and in control of their initiative. The professionals mainly emphasize the importance of the process, in particular the importance of success at the organisational or participant level. This result is striking because citizens' initiatives in the participation society are expected, among other things, to be able to replace services where they disappear or are under pressure. However, the results in this dissertation show that such a focus on success at the community level, i.e. achieving goals and therefore also maintaining services, is not supported from the perspective of the professionals.

Chapter 3 discusses the perspective of initiators on success. A questionnaire is used to analyse the levels at which initiators approach success (research question 1). The results show that the initiators include all three levels of success from chapter 2 in their definition. The emphasis is placed by the initiators on achieving goals. This falls under success at community level. The focus on achieving goals increases when it comes to the success of the own initiative. It should be noted, however, that goals can change over time and not achieving an initial goal can lead to success at a later point in time.

Chapter 3 also discusses the second research question. The accompanying literature study shows that there is a particular focus on success factors. Four categories can be distinguished: characteristics of the initiative, functional success, social relationships and input. In the questionnaire, these categories of success factors were discussed and there was room for a fifth category in which the initiators could mention success or failure factors that had not previously emerged in the literature. The regression analysis of the questionnaire data shows that success and failure factors can be classified in the categories mentioned. Only in the category 'social relations' no success and failure factors emerge. Success is influenced by characteristics of the initiative, such as group size, development phase and communication levels. Input, such as the relationship with governments, for example in the field of subsidies, also plays a role. The suggestions of the respondents resulted in two failure factors: lack of financial resources and disappointing contacts with the government. The extent to which goals have been achieved at that moment appears to be the most important factor influencing success within the category of functional success. This once again indicates the strong dependence of success on achieving goals from the initiators' perspective.
Continuity and the process of failure

The continuity of citizens' initiatives is discussed in Chapter 4 (research question 3). Continuity can be approached at three different levels: the participants, group and initiative level. At the participant level, continuity means that the individual participants are continuously involved in the initiative. A group can also be continuous, if the group is stable and none of the participants withdraws. This is referred to as continuity at group level. Continuity at initiative level means a higher form of continuity. This is the case if the initiative continues to exist, despite possible changes in the composition of the group, until the goal is reached.

The analysis of the questionnaires shows that continuity is mainly considered at the initiative level. Continuity is mainly related to the extent to which a goal has been achieved. The degree to which goals have been achieved has a positive influence on the likelihood that an initiative will continue. The results show that continuity is not strongly related to the failure of participants or the entire group of participants. This result seems to refute the assumption that citizens' initiatives can be vulnerable if they provide an alternative form of services within the 'participation society'.

Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the process that takes place in the event of the failure of a citizens' initiative (research question 4). Instead of focusing on 'individual' failure factors, an integrated approach is used in which failure is seen as a process with various factors that can interact. Six possible obstacles to citizens' initiatives were identified from the literature: not being representative of the community, volunteer burn-out, scale issues, insufficient financial resources, the relationship with the government and existing and changing policy. On the basis of three case studies of initiatives that saw themselves as unsuccessful, the perspectives of both the initiators and the professionals involved are included in the analysis of the failure process. The analysis of the cases reveals three themes within the failure process: (1) interaction with government and institutions, (2) appropriation and (3) personal investments.

The results show that with regard to the first theme, interaction with the government and institutions, shifting responsibilities can lead to various discrepancies, among other things in the pace that an initiative wants to maintain. These discrepancies contribute to the process that can lead to the failure of the initiative. Within the second theme, appropriation, it appears that the initiators do not always succeed in appropriating the initiative. Responsibilities are often shared with the government and in some cases the interests are opposing each other. The results of the third theme, personal investments, illustrate how initiators invest their time, energy and reputation in their initiative. Although these investments are large, there is no question of volunteer burn-out within these cases. The disadvantages of the personal investments do emerge, for example social or reputation damage, if the initiative's failure is attributed to the initiators. An important part of the failure
process appears to be discrepancy in scale. Citizens' initiatives operate at the local level but have to do business with governments and other institutions that operate at higher levels of scale.

Conclusions and policy implications

Governments, professionals and initiators all have their own view of the function of citizens' initiatives, such as providing a service or contributing to social cohesion. These divergent views can be an obstacle to the functioning of citizens' initiatives. Citizens' initiatives benefit from professionals who understand which function the initiative is trying to fulfil.

If citizens' initiatives are seen as a long-term solution in the provision of services, it is also important to consider that there will be areas where fewer or no initiatives arise. As a result, leaving services to citizens' initiatives can lead to more inequality. However, attempts to prevent this kind of inequality by means of top-down provision of services do not fit in well with the idea behind the 'participation society' and the current form of citizens' initiatives.

This dissertation presents five recommendations for policy that may possibly contribute to facilitating citizens' initiatives: developing a better understanding of the function of citizens' initiatives, providing a safety net function where initiatives are lacking, communication of limitations and boundaries, minimalizing social damage and a consideration of scale differences. The 'participation society' has created a new situation for governments and professionals: citizens' initiatives arise, also in depopulating rural areas, and they pursue their own goals and claim a share of government budgets. Governments and professionals in particular will have to respond to this and adjust to the needs of citizens' initiatives.