University of Groningen

The participation society and its inability to correct the failure of market players to deliver inadequate service levels in rural areas

Salemink, Koen; Strijker, Dirk

Published in:
Telecommunications Policy

DOI:
[10.1016/j.telpol.2018.03.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2018.03.013)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

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

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Salemink, K., & Strijker, D. (2018). The participation society and its inability to correct the failure of market players to deliver inadequate service levels in rural areas. *Telecommunications Policy*, 42(9), 757-765. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2018.03.013>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

The *participation society* and its inability to correct the failure of market players to deliver adequate service levels in rural areas

Koen Salemink*, Dirk Strijker

University of Groningen (NL), Faculty Spatial Sciences, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Rural broadband
Regulation
Participation society
Regional policy
The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This paper critically reviews the ‘participation society’ inspired policy measures of two Dutch provinces (Drenthe and Groningen) for providing rural broadband. Based on a database with broadband initiatives, interviews with stakeholders, focus groups and document analysis, it analyzes how rural broadband initiatives and regional governments interact in their ventures to provide superfast broadband to rural communities. Essential in this is that in the Dutch participation society concept, citizens’ initiatives are seen as an important actor to deal with failing service delivery by market players in rural areas. The relation between regional governments and citizens’ initiatives, however, is troublesome, resulting in inadequate policies. Key findings are that even when governments come up with supportive policies for citizens’ initiatives, initiatives still experience governmental efforts as constraining factors. Regional governments apply ‘old style’ governance and construct generic policy instruments, forcing initiatives to put a lot of effort in complying with generic policy requirements or political goals. Overall, solving a national market problem at the regional level proves to be problematic. More national guidance is needed to solve the rural broadband gap.

1. Introduction

From an international perspective, the Netherlands is often regarded as one of the most advanced countries when it comes to telecommunications infrastructure (Akamai, 2017; Lemstra and Melody, 2015). This strong international position informs and impacts how the Netherlands shapes their telecommunications policies. In fact, on many occasions the Dutch minister for Economic Affairs points out that ‘97% of the Netherlands has access to a Next Generation Technology’ (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/15027850, 2015). The devil is in the detail, however: nearly all households and businesses that belong to the group of three percent which are excluded, are located in rural areas (Salemink & Strijker, 2016a). This makes that in the Netherlands, the problem of material digital inclusion is first and foremost a rural problem.

The so-called rural broadband gap is a common problem in countries throughout the world and also a regularly addressed issue in this journal (see e.g. Feijóo, Ramos, Armuña, Arenal, & Gómez-Barroso, 2017; Gruber, Hätönen, & Koutroumpis, 2014; LaRose, Gregg, Strover, Straubhaar, & Carpenter, 2007; Prieger, 2013; Whitacre, Gallardo, & Strover, 2014). In a highly urbanized country like the Netherlands, though, rural issues are not placed highly on national policy agendas, and over the years the case of rural broadband provision has proved to be a prime example of this. The national government in Den Haag has continuously stressed that a lack of Next Generation Access is only a marginal problem, and solutions to this problem should be sought locally or regionally, i.e. on a municipal or provincial level (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/16181300, 2016). In the context of Dutch planning tradition,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: k.salemink@rug.nl (K. Salemink).

with provinces as the customary governmental body in rural development and country-side related policies (Terluin, 2003), this means that mainly provinces have taken on the responsibility of plan making and policy making for rural broadband provision.

On the national level there is, however, an overarching policy agenda that impacts how sector-specific policies are shaped: the development towards a participation society, or '*participatiesamenleving*' in Dutch (De Haan, Meier, Haartsen, & Strijker, 2017; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). The participation society promotes self-reliant communities and entails more responsibility for citizens and local action groups (Gieling, 2018). The participation society ought to be stimulated by a government that no longer prescribes citizens what they should do, yet it should facilitate citizens' initiatives in what they want to achieve. Despite ongoing critiques of this policy agenda stating that most of it is 'responsibility talk' instead of 'responsibility endowment' (e.g. König, 2015; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013), the idea of a participation society is very much noticeable in various public policies and public life (De Haan et al., 2017; Uitermark, 2015a).

Telecommunications is one of the sectoral policies in which the idea of a participation society resonates. The national government shifted the problem of rural broadband provision to lower levels of government. At the same time, these lower levels of government struggled with how to make sense of their renewed role in the participation society. This resulted in policies to stimulate rural broadband provision that strongly relied on local and civil action, endowing citizens with many responsibilities, but also many legal and financial risks (Bock, 2016; Salemink & Strijker, 2016a). This begs the question, then, to what extent the participation society can serve as a means to solve the rural broadband gap.

In this paper we discuss the participation society informed policies of two neighbouring Dutch provinces in the northeast of the Netherlands: Drenthe and Groningen. Based on a database with rural broadband initiatives, interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, and document analysis, we analyze how community broadband initiatives and local and regional governments interact in their ventures to provide superfast broadband to rural communities. In our conclusions we focus on commonalities in regional policies and their shortcomings. By doing this, we provide insights into the specific Dutch policy context and the efficacy of participation society informed regional policies for rural broadband provision. More generally, we contribute to the debate on citizen initiatives and the extent to which these can play a role in solving highly complex issues, such as correcting failing service delivery by market players in a competitive international infrastructural sector. Finally, we provide some recommendations on how conditions for citizen participation in complex issues can be improved. Notwithstanding the rather unconventional character of the Dutch context in the global telecommunications policy landscape, this paper identifies some transnational issues regarding the potential role of citizens and communities in telecommunications market failure.

2. Rural broadband provision and the participation society: origin and state of affairs

2.1. Rural broadband in the Netherlands: a brief overview

The Dutch state is proud of its strong position in the digital economy, with '97 percent of all household and businesses having access to Next Generation technologies' (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/15027850, 2015). With the densely built structure of the Netherlands, incumbent KPN (former state telephone company) and VodafoneZiggo (merger of former municipal cable companies) and their predecessors were in good positions to achieve high penetration rates (Lemstra and Melody, 2015). The network topologies are advantageous for upgrading and increasing capacity, as is required now with the developments towards Next Generation Access (Cambini and Jiang, 2009; Lemstra and Melody, 2015). However, the Netherlands faces considerably bigger challenges when it comes to improving their networks in areas which are less densely built, i.e. in the rural areas. Nowadays internationally owned companies such as KPN and VodafoneZiggo are reluctant to invest in rural areas, because according to them there is no sound business case to be formed there. This leaves rural areas in the Netherlands, like many rural areas throughout the world, underserved (Prieger, 2013; Roberts et al., 2017; Townsend, Sathiaselalan, Fairhurst, & Wallace, 2013).

Over the years, the Dutch national government has pointed to European-wide deregulations and privatizations in the telecommunications market, claiming that the regulatory framework does not allow for the required interventions, and that the market has to solve the problem. According to European regulations, government intervention is allowed in 'white market areas' (European Commission, 2013), but because of the 'local and utmost regional character of the problem', the national government regards herself as not the appropriate governmental body to initiate and finance interventions in white market areas (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/15027850, 2015; Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/16181300, 2016). With this standpoint – official policy documents and guidelines are lacking – the national government (Ministry of Economic Affairs, since 2017 Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate) shifts the responsibility for rural broadband to lower levels of government, i.e. the provinces and municipalities. This means that regional and local governments are endowed with the task to facilitate and/or stimulate rural broadband provision without central guidance from the national government.

Without central guidance, the provinces and municipalities are forced to invest a lot of time and resources in getting familiar with broadband provision in general; knowledge about technologies, network design, market situation, financial models. Next to this, these governments were specifically forced to gain in-depth and specialist knowledge about the legal issues regarding government interventions in the rural broadband market (Stratix, 2015; Salemink & Strijker, 2016b). Furthermore, they were faced by fore-running citizens' initiatives which were advocating for broadband in their local rural areas. Such initiatives are often led by highly-educated, well-networked and policy-informed key persons (Ashmore, Farrington, & Skerratt, 2015; 2016). These initial contacts between regional/local governments and citizens' initiatives sparked the governments' tendency to focus on local citizens to solve the highly complex problem of a lack of rural broadband provision (Bock, 2016; Salemink et al., 2017).

Table 1
Eight stages of rural broadband deployment.

Stage 1: Incentive	Recognition of the problem, i.e. poor broadband provision
Stage 2: Familiarization	Introduction to the actors and issues of rural broadband deployment
Stage 3: Inventory of demand	Assessing the potential demand in the target area
Stage 4: Campaigning	Campaigning in order to reach the target percentage of subscribers
Stage 5: Bundling demand	Formally bundling the demand (subscriptions) and forming the business case
Stage 6: Tendering and contracting	Composing a tender based on the business case and formally contracting a company for the deployment
Stage 7: Construction and commissioning	Process management of the construction as the commissioning party
Stage 8: Management and maintenance	Managing the network (cooperative) and outsourcing the maintenance

2.2. The participation society: same actors, new rules of engagement?

The initial relation between regional/local governments and citizens' initiatives led to local communities taking a centre stage in policies for rural broadband. Without clear guidelines on how to conjointly establish a rural broadband network, regional and local government and citizen groups got into a situation of 'pioneering' and 'trial and error' (Bock, 2016). Especially regional governments, i.e. the provinces, took on the problem, since they are regarded as able to work across municipal borders and they are financially strong enough to subsidize potential deficits (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2012; Salemink & Strijker, 2016a).

In the period 2012–2015, the forerunning rural broadband initiatives experienced that delivering rural broadband requires going through several different stages. All of these stages come with specific challenges, requiring specific skills and knowledge. In total there are eight general stages which have to be completed by rural broadband initiatives in order to actually deliver a network (De Haan et al., 2017; Salemink & Strijker, 2016b; Stratix, 2015 – see Table 1). These early initiatives showed that it is important to involve local citizens and local action groups throughout the process, yet citizen involvement was of crucial importance during stages 3–5: inventory of demand, campaigning, and bundling demand (Ashmore, Farrington, & Skerratt, 2016; Salemink & Strijker, 2016b). Local people proved to be able to produce local knowledge, to assist in creating target group specific marketing campaigns, and mobilizing local demand (for more background information, see Supplementary Material of this paper). This observation urged provinces to design their policies in such a way that citizen participation was regarded as a requirement for further government action (see also Gieling, 2018; Uitermark, 2015a,b). Local communities and community leaders, then, were not only vital for success (Ashmore et al., 2016); they were now also given the lead in fostering rural broadband access.

This is where the overarching policy agenda of 'the participation society' (*participatiesamenleving*) comes in, a concept that was boosted into both the public and the academic debate after the Dutch King Willem-Alexander explicitly discussed it in his yearly King's Speech in September 2013 (Rijksoverheid, 2013). Similar to the phenomenon of 'the Big Society' in the United Kingdom (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013), the participation society calls for self-reliant communities, and more participation of and responsibilities for citizens, also regarding public service provision (De Haan et al., 2017; König, 2015; Pestoff, 2012; Van Meerkerk, Boonstra, & Edelenbos, 2013).

Altogether, the participation society is a revised overarching view on how society, and communities within that society, should function (Gieling, 2018). The agenda quickly developed and both governments and citizens' initiatives answered to the call for 'less top-down government' and 'more bottom-up citizen action', thereby newly shaping the interplay between markets, governments and citizens. In the period 2013–2015 the Netherlands saw a clear rise in various categories of citizens' initiatives, such as care cooperatives (30–100), energy cooperatives (over 500 by 2015) and rural broadband initiatives (from a few in 2013 up to 75 by 2015) (Uitermark, 2015a, p. 58).

The rise of the participation society concept raised the interest of academics, and from the beginning several authors have critiqued the concept and its principles for mainly being 'responsibility talk' instead of a true empowerment agenda (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). The main critique of the participation society so far, though, has to do with its exclusionary character (Uitermark, 2015b). A call for citizen action usually urges some citizens to organize themselves – mostly well-educated and resourceful people – whereas others are not able or willing to organize themselves – mostly low-educated and less resourceful people (Bock, 2016; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013; Uitermark, 2015a, 2015b). This inability and/or unwillingness can stem from within the community (endogenous forces) or from outside the community (exogenous forces), yet the key observation of many scholars is that a call for more citizen action can cause more exclusion (Bock, 2016; Uitermark, 2015a). This has far-reaching consequences, especially when (public) service provision ought to be delivered by citizen groups, which the participation society promotes. As citizens tend to organize themselves along the lines of 'our kind of people', this usually means that 'not our kind of people' are often served less adequately or not at all (Uitermark, 2015a).

The exclusionary character of the participation society and citizens' initiatives has caught the attention of governments. The participation society agenda has not changed the governments' responsibility of ensuring equal access to particular goods and services, and therefore these governments put considerable effort into steering citizens' initiatives with the purpose that these initiatives will not exclude particular (groups of) people. Governments tend to deal with these shortcomings of the participation society by using 'default settings', stemming from the times when governments were still in a lead role (Koster, Aykaç, & Verschuren, 2015; Uitermark, 2015a). This 'old style' of governance and power relations regularly causes friction between local and regional governments, and active citizens (Bock, 2016; Koster et al., 2015). The same actors as before now have to learn new ways of cooperating. The bigger societal question then is how these power relations between citizens and governments can and (ideally) should be changed, so that these relations become a source for innovation in society, instead of a source of frustration. This paper tries to fill this

Table 2

Database information about rural broadband initiatives.

Characteristic	Information on Initiative
Area of operation	Target area, ambitions for scaling, the governments and telecommunications companies (telco's) involved in that area
Key persons or organizations	Background of key persons and/or organizations on the board
Network relations of the key persons	Relations of key persons to governments, embeddedness in specific economic sectors, experience in local government or volunteering and community action
Arguments used in the campaign	Style of campaign (targeted versus generic), focus on specific economic sectors (agriculture, 'cottage industries'), statements from various media sources
Status of the initiative	Stage of the 8-stage model the initiative is at as per April 2015 and the development towards that stage
Character of the network	'Open network' managed by the community or a closed turn-key network managed by a telco, technology used for the network (fibre-optics, coaxial cable, wireless)

gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence from two neighbouring Dutch provinces (Drenthe and Groningen) on how regional governments and rural broadband initiatives interact in their ventures to deliver rural broadband.

3. Methodology

To answer the research question, this paper builds on several research projects that were conducted over the period January 2012–May 2017. These projects, four in total, serve as building blocks. The data varies per province studied, but for every province there is sufficient data to critically assess their policies and their impacts.

The first building block is a longitudinal study of rural broadband initiatives in the Netherlands, conducted from January 2012 until May 2017, including many initiatives in the provinces of Groningen, Drenthe. For this study, a database has been constructed and maintained, including initiatives that put effort into stimulating Next Generation Access in rural areas. In the database information is included about the area of operation, the key persons or organizations, arguments used in the campaign, the status of the initiative, and the character of the network (see Table 2). The statuses of the initiatives were monitored using the 8-stage model for community broadband (see section 2.2). The information in the database stems from initiatives' websites, media clippings from the LexisNexis database, official governmental documents, and social media messages, allowing for monitoring and analysis of the reasons behind the progress of the initiatives. The number of active initiatives in the database gradually increased, from 80 at the end of 2014 to 150 ultimo 2015, decreasing to 135 in February 2017.

Next to this overarching study, several research projects were conducted for the provinces studied in this paper. For the province of Groningen, two studies were conducted. The first, 'Superfast Internet East Groningen', took place from January 2012–February 2013 and was an exploratory study of the field of superfast broadband in the context of Groningen, including interviews with various stakeholders and GIS analysis of the market situation. The second, 'Next Generation Access for entire Groningen', took place from October 2014–February 2015 and consisted of two focus groups with policy makers and key persons from rural broadband initiatives in Groningen (12 persons in total), and 7 follow-up in-depth interviews with policy makers and key persons. The focal point of this research was to determine the conditions for a cooperative process (market, government, citizens) to stimulate rural broadband provision.

For the province of Drenthe, a research project was done into the (then) current state of affairs among rural broadband initiatives in Drenthe (Mid-2016). For this research, (phone-)interviews were conducted with key persons of 17 initiatives (out of a total of 25), focusing on the extent to which the initiative (group) deemed themselves capable of delivering a Next Generation Access network. The interviews had a reflective nature, discussing both the capabilities of the initiatives and the role of the provincial government.

Although the projects were undertaken as contract research, it was secured in these contracts that the data from the projects could be used for academic research. The research projects for the provinces also included recommendations about how to proceed with their policies, but up front it was clear that these recommendations would not necessarily be accepted and put into policy. Therefore, the data can be used freely to critically discuss the provinces' policies.

4. Regional regulatory measures: evidence from Drenthe and Groningen

4.1. Province of Drenthe: from stimulating bottom-up to top-down steering

Local bottom-up initiatives for rural broadband in Drenthe date back as far as 2013, when the first key persons started to organize their ventures in a trust or a cooperative (Saleminck & Strijker, 2016b). In April 2014, the provincial council adopted a policy to develop 'process and programme-based support for the growing number of rural broadband initiatives' (Province of Drenthe, 2015). The province would support initiatives financially for conducting local feasibility studies and demand bundling activities, subsidizing up to a maximum of €50.000,- (Province of Drenthe, 2014). Furthermore, the province explicitly stated that citizens' initiatives were essential in fostering rural broadband access, and therefore a quartermaster (*kwartiermaker*) was appointed to – paradoxically as it may seem – stimulate the initiation of bottom rural broadband initiatives. In May 2016, there were 25 rural broadband initiatives in Drenthe.

With this subsidy the quartermaster supported the initiation of several rural broadband initiatives in the province, contributing to ensuring that 55% of the ‘white areas’ in Drenthe were covered by initiatives. This seemed a result which the province had hoped for, hence the prolongation of the subsidy scheme (Province of Drenthe, 2016). However, interviews with key persons of initiatives showed that, during 2014–2015, the quartermaster operated rather as a soloist and his work was not sufficiently checked by others. Many of these quartermaster-initiated initiatives turned out to be highly dependent on the expertise of the quartermaster. Interviews showed that when the quartermaster left during 2016, several initiatives stalled and had to look for (new) help from outside.

Although the province could not prevent several initiatives from becoming dependent on one expert, the board of the province did recognize the risks of this dependency. During 2015 the Province of Drenthe formally therefore organized a platform to support rural broadband initiatives: *Verbind Drenthe* (Connect Drenthe) – see also <https://verbiddrenthe.nl/>. The platform's main task is to support initiatives on technical, financial, legal, and organizational matters. The province finances the platform and assigns general tasks to it, yet the people working at the platform are explicitly endowed with the task to support citizens' initiatives and, if necessary, take a stand against the interests of the province. In theory, this constellation works. The province designs policies and funding schemes to stimulate rural broadband provision, citizens' initiatives take on the responsibility to organize local capacities and bundle demand, and *Verbind Drenthe* supports and tries to empower the initiatives to achieve their goals. However, this constellation also raises some questions.

Firstly, the province designed generic policies and expects initiatives to operate according to these policies, as is common practice for provinces. If the initiative is constructed after, or even as a result of, the province's support programme, then an initiative knows from the start what is expected in order to be eligible for government support. Initiatives that were active before the official government policies were adopted, however, initially developed their own strategy, vision, and aims, but are then suddenly faced by top-down and inevitably generic policies. As a consequence, forerunning initiatives had to put a lot of time and energy in adapting to government policies. Interviews with these forerunners showed that the province's generic policies led to administrative burdens and a lack of focus on the actual problem, i.e. delivering rural broadband. Some even stated that the support programme of the province led to competing initiatives within the municipality, for example in the municipalities of Aa en Hunze and Borger-Odoorn in the northeast. In turn, this resulted in a lot of frustration among the key persons of these initiatives and, to some extent, a loss of control over their ventures (interviews with forerunner initiatives in May 2016).

Secondly, the case of Drenthe shows that policies with a strong reliance on citizen participation are incapable of serving communities that do not engage (Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Coverage with initiatives of 55% of the white market areas was reached with the first round of the support programme, but some areas, especially in the poorer and lower educated southeast of the province, lagged behind and showed little interest in engaging in a participatory policy process. Under the prevailing policy, this would mean that these communities would not receive government support, as they do not meet the requirements of that policy, i.e. organize in an initiative. During 2016, *Verbind Drenthe* put a lot of effort in activating these ‘communities that do not engage’ (interview with director *Verbind Drenthe*). In some cases this had the desired effect and, at the end of 2016, all municipalities in Drenthe had at least one active initiative for rural broadband. However, these initiatives still did not cover all white market areas in the province.¹

Thirdly, the initial local and small-scale orientation of Drenthe's policy has resulted in a heterogeneous patch work of initiatives, leaving some areas without any initiative. The province acknowledged this and, after the provincial elections in March 2015 put different political parties in power, the policy agenda changed. No longer was there a focus on stimulating bottom-up initiative, yet now the province started to steer towards cooperation between initiatives. Mergers of small-scale initiatives into larger regional broadband companies were foreseen, in order to achieve the Province's goal that all people in Drenthe should have Next Generation Access by the start of 2019 (Salemink & Strijker, 2016a). Again, decisions made based on a top-down interest led to frustration among members of initiatives. Throughout mid-2016 – mid-2017, *Verbind Drenthe* had to manage relations between initiatives to smoothen the process towards potential mergers. Although the first mergers have taken place in the northwest of the province, it is still unclear whether these larger initiatives will actually deliver rural broadband. The trajectories towards the mergers, though, have put a lot of pressure on local communities, especially in socially less cohesive rural areas (Bock, 2016; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013). Furthermore, some rural broadband initiatives, especially the forerunners, indicated in the interviews that the province and *Verbind Drenthe* are appropriating the initiatives by focusing so much on mergers. Key persons experience a loss of control over their initiative and some go as far as to state that the province is taking over in order to ‘claim the eventual success’ (interview with forerunner initiative, May 2016).

In sum, platform *Verbind Drenthe* proves crucial in understanding the complex nature of Drenthe's policies. And in a way, the existential basis behind *Verbind Drenthe* is paradoxical: the platform has to exist, because otherwise the citizens' initiatives would not – or only limitedly – be able to make sense of technologically and financially advanced generic policies. Although this shows that Drenthe recognizes the difficulties regarding the topic of rural broadband, it also reveals that the topic cannot be adequately solved with policies based on the participation society ideal. Finally, it should be noted that part of the problem regarding the complexity is caused by deliberate policy choices on behalf of the provincial government.

4.2. Province of Groningen: political switch in favour of the market?

The Province of Groningen has a rich history when it comes to broadband policies and measures. This dates back as far as 2002 when the province (Department Economic Affairs) commissioned and financed the construction of ‘fibre-optic rings’ (backbone

¹ For the most recent state of affairs, see <https://verbiddrenthe.nl/initiatieven>.

network) throughout its area in order to facilitate further fibre-optic penetration ([Letter to the Provincial Council of Groningen, 2008](#)). After the completion of the network, the province outsourced the management and maintenance of these rings to the two biggest telecom network companies in the Netherlands, KPN and VodafoneZiggo, because they were seen as the most appropriate parties to take on this specialist task. This outsourcing, and the motives behind it, resonated in the province's follow-up actions and measures. Despite the existence of several rural broadband initiatives, policies of the Province of Groningen have become mostly aimed at stimulating investment of market players, instead of supporting new players (such as citizens' initiatives) to get access to an oligopoly market ([Saleminck et al., 2017](#)).

There has been a policy period, however, in which the province actively explored the option of citizens' initiatives. During the 2011–2015 administration, the Executive Council of the province included a member who was responsible for the portfolio of 'liveability'. This portfolio mainly involved community development in relation to population decline, which strongly impacts parts of Groningen ([Haartsen & Van Wissen, 2012](#)). In order to improve – or at least retain – acceptable levels of liveability, the endeavours of citizens were highly valued and regarded as 'pivotal' in achieving liveability goals (see also [Gieling & Haartsen, 2016](#)). The liveability agenda of the province included rural broadband access as a topic and spearheaded citizens' initiatives as a solution to the rural digital divide. From that moment two departments were working on the rural broadband dossier: 'Economic Affairs' and 'Liveability'. The forerunning initiative 'Stichting Oldambt Verbindt' from the Municipality of Oldambt was declared a pilot to study the potentials and pitfalls of the approach (interview Stichting Oldambt Verbindt). As a pilot, Stichting Oldambt Verbindt received a subsidy from the Liveability department to work on a business case, and on campaign and demand bundling strategies. The idea behind this pilot was that results from Oldambt could be generalized and used in other areas of the province.

Towards the end of the administration period (second half of 2014) the province commissioned a participatory research project (conducted by the authors of this paper) to establish what the needs were of the growing number of broadband initiatives. During this project, several key persons of initiatives explained during interviews that the 'schism' between two departments of the province, i.e. 'Liveability' and 'Economic Affairs', caused confusion. On the one hand, 'Liveability' pushed for enabling citizens' initiatives to come up with plans and business cases. On the other hand, 'Economic Affairs' was leaning more towards market-led solutions to the problem. Key persons claimed to receive 'mixed signals' (interviews with key persons in Groningen, October 2014) and during the first focus group session in October 2014, these key persons unanimously stated that their undertakings would benefit from more 'unity and clarity' in the work of the province.

Another important critique by the key persons was that the province was not providing adequate support. Support was in place for Stichting Oldambt Verbindt, but other initiatives were left waiting for the results from Oldambt. The second focus group meeting (December 2014) showed there was growing discontent and impatience among the stakeholders in the province. Therefore, the responsible Member of the Executive Board of the province ('Liveability') decided she wanted to propose a new policy at the end of the administration period (February 2015), based on the outcomes of the participatory research project. In this policy, the province would – again – construct the backbone structure in order to lower the costs of the network deployment, but this time the backbone structure would be more fine-grained ('Fiber to the Street'). Rural broadband initiatives were then seen as the preferred partners to deliver the last mile ('Fiber to the Home'). This way, further penetration with fibre-optics was delivered by the province, whereas meeting the actual demand in different areas was done by initiatives. Since it was proposed only at the end of the administration period, the Executive Board was not able to turn it into actual policy. The plan was handed to the next Executive Board, who then had to decide on its implementation.

Similar to Drenthe, the provincial elections changed how the problem of rural broadband provision was approached. The new Executive Board (April 2015 and onwards) dismissed the plan proposed by the former Executive Board (2011–2015). Instead of strongly focusing on citizens' initiatives, the province designed a new policy, without consulting the rural broadband initiatives as a stakeholder ([Letter to the Provincial Council of Province of Groningen, 2016](#); [Saleminck & Strijker, 2016b](#)). The focus shifted from bottom-up and participatory, to top-down and more province-led. The Executive Board of the province stressed the importance of 'quickly delivering a solution for all', and it expected that rural broadband initiatives could not deliver this ([Letter to the Provincial Council of Province of Groningen, 2016](#)). Instead, the province designed a subsidy scheme with a total budget of 40 million euros to ensure that by the end of 2018 all people in Groningen have Next Generation Access ([Province of Groningen, 2016](#)). Potential network players can apply a request, but the province arranged an external consultancy company to check the eligibility of the applicant. This is not uncommon, yet the key persons from rural broadband initiatives claim that the subsidy scheme is 'intolerant' to citizens' initiatives, relying heavily on the track record of the applicant and requiring a lot of equity in order to be eligible. Furthermore, the applicant would have to run all legal and financial risks. Media clippings in our database show that citizens' initiatives have been critical of this development, and the province has been accused of 'side-lining' the rural broadband initiatives ([Letter from the Executive Board of the Province of Groningen, 2017](#); RTV; [Noord, 2017](#)). The initiatives claim it was 'nearly impossible' to fulfil all the subsidy scheme's agreements and they sensed that the scheme was designed to exclude starting citizens' initiatives.²

In sum, the rural broadband policy of the Province of Groningen has changed over time, from a strong reliance on citizens' initiatives in the period 2011–2015, to a more top-down and market-oriented policy from mid-2015 and onwards. The schism between the departments of 'Liveability' and 'Economic Affairs' was solved, yet the rural broadband dossier moved to Economic Affairs, resulting in less room for citizen participation. While the policy of the province changed over time, the rural broadband initiatives had become stakeholders with vested interest. Rural broadband initiatives in Groningen spent a lot of time and energy on complying with a subsidy scheme – a subsidy scheme which was designed for all potential applicants, yet the level of detail that was

² In July 2017 it was announced that a regional company 'Rodin', mainly specialized in wireless applications, would receive the funding.

required to be eligible for subsidy was experienced as very exclusionary by the key persons of rural broadband initiatives. Like Drenthe, the Groningen case shows that an initial participation society agenda got overruled by a more technocratic, sectoral and top-down agenda, geared at traditional telecom sector actors instead of citizens' initiatives.

5. Conclusion: potentials and pitfalls of the citizen participation approach

5.1. Key observations

The two neighbouring provinces Drenthe and Groningen have followed different policy trajectories, yet there are some key findings which can be grouped under three themes: political appropriation, default settings of governments, and 'the grand absentee', i.e. the national government.

Firstly, *political appropriation* occurred in both provinces, when after the provincial elections a new Executive Board introduced new policies; policies which were mainly aimed at achieving success quicker than with the original policies. Both newly installed Executive Boards aimed at fully connecting their province before the provincial elections in March 2019 (Groningen: end of 2018; Drenthe: early 2019). Policies that relied too much on citizen action were deemed vulnerable and could result in rural areas without Next Generation Access at the end of the administration period, despite all the policy efforts. It might seem logical for politicians to aim at swift success stories and politically appropriate the dossier, but this appropriation is accompanied by a loss of control on the citizens' initiative's side. Initially, active citizens took on the role that was set out for them within the participation society, yet they were bypassed (Drenthe) or even side-lined (Groningen) once the provinces observed that the citizens' initiatives needed time to learn about the market and get organized. As well-meant as this may be, the initiatives mostly experienced this as a 'vote of no confidence'.

Secondly, Drenthe and Groningen struggle to adapt to the new rules of engagement in the participation society (see also section 2.2). Both provinces have shown two '*default settings*' (Uitermark, 2015a) in their policies that cause problems for their relations with initiatives. One default setting is that the provinces came up with top-down, one-size-fits-all policies, whereas key persons from initiatives requested tailor-made policies. This is in line with the findings of De Haan et al. (2017) that professionals have a different view on how to design policies than the people who make use of the policies. This mutual misconception has caused a lot of frustration on both sides, but most notably among active citizens. Another default setting is that governments, in their endeavours to reduce risks when spending public money, try to shift legal and financial risks to citizens' initiatives. Again, the aspiration to reduce risks regarding the spending of public money seems valid, yet it becomes paradoxical when in turn a part of that public has to face all the risks. During focus groups in Groningen, participants agreed that, different from municipalities, 'provinces are not used to having direct relations with active citizens' (see also Koster et al., 2015). If regional policies continue to be inspired by the participation society concept, provinces will have to find a way to engage with citizens more directly and do away with their traditional 'provincial approach'.

Thirdly, there is the same '*grand absentee*' in both provinces: the national government, particularly the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Provinces and citizens' initiatives experienced difficulties because of a lack of clear guidance from the national level. Regional and local actors had to 'reinvent the wheel', while the level of government that could have an overview of developments, remained aloof. It took until 2016 for the Ministry of Economic Affairs to put substantial effort into creating a public knowledge (data)base on good practices in rural broadband provision (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/16181300, 2016). However, there are no signs that the national government will step in to create a more integrated policy, let alone to allocate financial resources to cover for deficits. Despite policy pressures from various levels of government (provinces, municipalities and even the European Union) the ministry is persistent in its statement that it is 'a local and utmost regional problem', even though this regional problem is found in all twelve provinces in The Netherlands (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/16181300, 2016).

5.2. Participation society: an important ingredient, or a recipe for disaster?

Initially, regional policies in The Netherlands embraced the concept of a participation society and relied on citizen action and participation to solve the rural broadband gap. Once the limitations of this approach became clear, regional governments intervened top-down. Recent figures show that there are still approximately 200.000 households in rural areas without Next Generation Access (Salemink & Strijker, 2016a), yet in many of these rural areas there are now also active citizens who feel bypassed. In sum, the 'citizen participation approach' has proved to be inadequate: mid-2017, only three out of 25 initiatives in Drenthe, and only one small-scale initiative in Groningen have delivered a network. The Dutch experience can serve as a lesson learnt for other countries, especially for European countries that are subject to the same EU regulations. Constraining as the regulatory framework might be, governments cannot expect communities to solve the problem without substantial governmental support. As other scholars have shown, citizen action alone will not resolve geographical inequality, especially if government arrangements and agents persist in their old style of governance (Ashmore et al., 2016; Skerratt & Steiner, 2013; Uitermark, 2015b). As a corollary of years of muddling through, active citizens have become frustrated about their relations with government authorities; active citizens who quite often also participate or volunteer in other local initiatives. This way, the impact of citizen participation for rural broadband reaches beyond the telecom sector into wider rural society. The question whether the participation society is an important ingredient or a recipe for disaster cannot be answered easily. The empirical evidence in this paper does show, though, that solving the rural broadband gap cannot be the responsibility, nor the risk, of citizens alone. If The Netherlands really aims for an all-inclusive digital society, including its countryside, it should revisit its policies and at the same time recognize the valuable role citizens can have in mobilizing local demand (Ashmore et al., 2016; Salemink & Strijker, 2016b). If a government calls for citizen participation, then it should be clear up

front what the government expects in order to reduce mutual misconceptions. National guidance and resources are needed to establish a less fragmented and more effective approach, in order to eventually solve the rural broadband gap. The cases of Drenthe and Groningen show that solving a national market problem at the regional level is problematic.

Acknowledgements

This paper builds on data gathered and knowledge gained from projects for the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, the Province of Drenthe, and the Province of Groningen. Special thanks to Sanne Kasten, Arjen Edzes, Gosse Bouter and Marlous Rosegaar for their contribution to the data collection.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2018.03.013>.

References

- Akamai Technologies (2017). *Q1 2017 state of the internet/connectivity report*, Cambridge, MA Accessible through <https://www.akamai.com/us/en/about/our-thinking/state-of-the-internet-report/global-state-of-the-internet-connectivity-reports.jsp>.
- Ashmore, F., Farrington, J., & Skerratt, S. (2015). Superfast broadband and rural community resilience: Examining the rural need for speed. *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 131(3–4), 265–278. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2014.978808>.
- Ashmore, F., Farrington, J., & Skerratt, S. (2016). Community-led broadband in rural digital infrastructure development: Implications for resilience. *Journal of Rural Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.09.004>.
- Bock, B. (2016). Rural marginalisation and the role of social innovation: A turn towards nexogenous development and rural reconnection. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 56(4), 532–573.
- Cambini, C., & Jiang, Y. (2009). Broadband investment and regulation: A literature review. *Telecommunications Policy*, 33(10–11), 559–574.
- De Haan, E., Meier, S., Haartsen, T., & Strijker, D. (2017). Defining ‘success’ of local citizens’ initiatives in maintaining public services in rural areas: A professional’s perspective. *Sociologia Ruralis*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/soru.12173> Accepted manuscript.
- European Commission (2013). *The broadband State aid rules explained: An eGuide for Decision Makers*. Brussels: DG Communications Networks, Content & Technology.
- Feijóo, C., Ramos, S., Armuña, C., Arenal, A., & Gómez-Barroso (2017). A study on the deployment of high-speed broadband networks in NUTS3 regions within the framework of digital agenda for Europe. *Telecommunications Policy*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2017.11.001> Accepted manuscript.
- Gieling, J. (2018). *A place for life or a place to live: Rethinking village attachment, volunteering and liveability in Dutch rural areas [Groningen]*. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.
- Gieling, J., & Haartsen, T. (2016). Liveable Villages: The relationship between volunteering and liveability in the perceptions of rural residents. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 57(S1), 576–597. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/soru.12151>.
- Gruber, H., Hätönen, J., & Koutroumpis, P. (2014). Broadband access in the EU: An assessment of future economic benefits. *Telecommunications Policy*, 38(11), 1046–1058.
- Haartsen, T., & Van Wissen, L. J. G. (2012). Causes and consequences of regional population decline for primary schools. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 103, 487–496.
- König, P. D. (2015). Moral societal renewal or getting the country back to work: Welfare state culture as a resource and a constraint for policy discourse. *Politics & Policy*, 43(5), 647–678.
- Koster, M., Aykaç, R., & Verschuren, O. (2015). *De Provincie en de Burger: Een Spannend Avontuur? [The province and the Citizen: An Exciting Adventure?]* (Monitoring en Evaluatie Pilots Burgerparticipatie, Provincie Noord-Holland) Utrecht: Bestuurs- en Organisatiewetenschap/Universiteit Utrecht.
- Lemstra, W., & Melody, W. (2015). Cross-case analysis. In W. Lemstra, & W. Melody (Eds.). *The dynamics of broadband markets in Europe: Realizing the 2020 digital agenda* (pp. 353–384). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LaRose, R., Gregg, J. L., Strover, S., Straubhaar, J., & Carpenter, S. (2007). Closing the rural broadband gap: Promoting adoption of the Internet in rural America. *Telecommunications Policy*, 31(6–7), 359–373.
- Letter from the Executive Board of the Province of Groningen (2017). *Verzoek om uitstel termijn van indiening definitieve subsidieaanvraag voor regeling Snel Internet Groningen [Request for suspension of submitting definitive subsidy application for subsidy scheme Fast Internet Groningen]*. Groningen: Economic Affairs, reference 2017-15.560/13/A 15, case number 681618.
- Letter to the Parliament by Minister Kamp, H.G.J (2015). *Snel Internet in Buitengebieden en 4G-Dekking [Fast internet in remote areas and 4G coverage]*. The Hague: Ministry of Economic Affairs, reference DGETM-TM/15027850.
- Letter to the Parliament by Minister Kamp, H.G.J (2016). *Ontwikkelingen omtrent snel internet in het buitengebied [Developments regarding fast internet in remote areas]*. The Hague: Ministry of Economic Affairs, reference DGETM-TM/16181300.
- Letter to the Provincial Council of Groningen (2008). *Resultaten project ‘provinciering’ [Results project ‘provincial backbone’]*. Groningen: Province of Groningen, Economic Affairs, reference 2008-30.288/24.
- Letter to the Provincial Council of Groningen (2016). *Statenvragen inzake snel internet voor iedereen [Questions from the council regarding fast internet for all]*. Groningen: Province of Groningen, Economic Affairs, reference 2016-61.3755/6/A.6.
- Ministry of Economic Affairs (2012). *Goed op weg met breedband, handreiking voor gemeentes en provincies [The right way with broadband, guide for municipalities and provinces]*. The Hague: Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation.
- Noord, R. T. V. (2017). ‘Snel internet voor alle Groningers in 2018 is een illusie’ [‘Fast internet for all Groningers in 2018 is an illusion’]. 3 April 2017. Available at: <http://www.rtvnoord.nl/nieuws/176334/Snel-internet-voor-alle-Groningers-in-2018-is-een-illusie>.
- Pestoff, V. (2012). Co-production and third sector social services in Europe: Some concepts and evidence. *Voluntas*, 23(4), 1102–1118.
- Prieger, J. E. (2013). The broadband digital divide and the economic benefits of mobile broadband for rural areas. *Telecommunications Policy*, 37(6–7), 483–502.
- Province of Drenthe (2014). *Uitvoeringsregeling subsidie hoogwaardige communicatienetwerken Drenthe 2014 [Implementation policy for subsidy high quality communication networks Drenthe 2014]*. Available at: http://decentrale.regelgeving.overheid.nl/cvdr/xhtmloutput/historie/Drenthe/332295/332295_1.html.
- Province of Drenthe (2015). *Uitvoeringsregeling aanleg breedband Drenthe 2015 [Implementation policy for broadband in Drenthe 2015]*. Available at: www.zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/prb-2015-6257.html.
- Province of Drenthe (2016). *Ook in 2016 subsidie voor vraagbundeling breedband in Drenthe [Also in 2016 subsidy for bundling demand in Drenthe]*. Available at: <https://www.provincie.drenthe.nl/onderwerpen/wonen-leefomgeving/snel-internet-heel/nieuws-breedband/@117908/2016-subsidie/>.
- Province of Groningen (2016). *Subsidieregeling snel internet groningen [subsidy scheme fast internet groningen]*. Available at: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/prb-2016-5560.html>.
- Rijksoverheid (2013). *Troonrede 2013. King’s speech by king Willem-Alexander, 17 September 2013, The Hague*. Available at: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2013/09/17/troonrede-2013>.
- Roberts, E., Beel, D., Philip, L., & Townsend, L. (2017). Rural resilience in a digital society: Editorial. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 54, 355–359. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.06.010>.

- Salemink, K., & Strijker, D. (2016a). *Breedband in buitengebieden: Succes- en faalfactoren bij breedbandinitiatieven* [Broadband in rural areas: Success and failure factors in broadband initiatives] (URSI research reports; Vol. 358). Groningen: Urban and Regional Studies Institute/University of Groningen.
- Salemink, K., & Strijker, D. (2016b). Rural broadband initiatives in The Netherlands as a training ground for neo-endogenous development. *Local Economy*, 31(7), 778–794. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0269094216670940>.
- Salemink, K., Strijker, D., & Bosworth, G. (2017). The community reclaims control? Learning experiences from rural broadband initiatives in The Netherlands. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 57(S1), 555–575. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/soru.12150>.
- Skerratt, S., & Steiner, A. (2013). Working with communities-of-place: Complexities of empowerment. *Local Economy*, 28(3), 320–338.
- Stratix Consulting (2015). *Onderzoek LTE-dekking in Nederland: Mogelijkheden voor gebieden zonder snelle vaste internettoegang* [Research on LTE coverage in The Netherlands: Opportunities for areas without access to superfast internet]. Hilversum: Stratix Consultancy – commissioned by the Ministry of Economic Affairs.
- Terluin, I. J. (2003). Differences in economic development in rural regions of advanced countries: An overview and critical analysis of theories. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 19(3), 327–344.
- Townsend, L., Sathaseelan, A., Fairhurst, G., & Wallace, C. (2013). Enhanced broadband access as a solution to the social and economic problems of the rural digital divide. *Local Economy*, 28(6), 580–595. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0269094213496974>.
- Uitermark, J. (2015a). De default settings van de participatiesamenleving. *Bestuurskunde*, 24(2), 58–62.
- Uitermark, J. (2015b). Longing for Wikitopia: The study and politics of self-organisation. *Urban Studies*, 52(13), 2301–2312.
- Van Meerkerk, I., Boonstra, B., & Edelenbos, J. (2013). Self-organization in urban regeneration. A two case comparative research. *European Planning Studies*, 21(10), 1630–1652.
- Verhoeven, I., & Tonkens, E. (2013). Talking active citizenship: Framing welfare state reform in England and The Netherlands. *Social Policy and Society*, 12(3), 415–426.
- Whitacre, B., Gallardo, R., & Strover, S. (2014). Broadband's contribution to economic growth in rural areas: Moving towards a causal relationship. *Telecommunications Policy*, 38(11), 1011–1023.