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Understanding the success of rural citizens' initiatives: Perspectives of founders

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1. Introduction

Demographic transformations, austerity measures and changing relations between government and citizens as a result of neo-liberal policies have given rise to community-led developments in rural areas (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004) and fuelled interest in citizens' initiatives in general (Bailey and Pill, 2015; Bock, 2016; Dekker & van den Broek, 1998; Flinders and Moon, 2011; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003; Healey, 2015; Lambri and Petrescu, 2016; Steiner and Atterton, 2014). This interest has grown in particular because public services are under pressure and civil society actors increasingly contribute to these services, for example, by starting social enterprises (Healey, 2015; Munoz et al., 2015; Teasdale, 2012). In rural areas, the need for citizens who contribute to service delivery is more urgent than in metropolitan areas because of changes such as (expected) depopulation, ageing, digital exclusion, school closures, unemployment, under-employment, high mobility costs and changing consumption demands (Copus et al., 2011; Salemin, 2016; Skerratt, 2010; Steiner and Atterton, 2014; Woods, 2006). Therefore, knowledge of the contributions of community-led development, social entrepreneurship and citizens' initiatives to service delivery is important.

Teasdale (2012) conceptualizes social enterprises as organizations that use trade to produce societal benefits. In this vein, citizens' initiatives can be considered a special form of social entrepreneurship with a focus on the public domain. Citizens' initiatives may be viewed as *a group of people contributing to the public domain on a voluntary basis and without financial compensation* (De Haan et al., 2017). Regarding the aspect of societal benefit, it is logical that citizens' initiatives and social enterprises are closely related to each other. These concepts are furthermore related because both include the notion of active citizens and the delivery of public services when the state or market fails (Cheshire and Woods, 2009; Healey, 2015; Jones and Little, 2000; Shucksmith et al., 2006; Teasdale, 2012). However, Montgomery et al. (2012) also emphasize the differences between social entrepreneurship and citizens' initiatives. They define collective social entrepreneurship as *'collaboration amongst similar as well as diverse actors for the purpose of applying business principles to solving social problems'*. While collective social

enterprises and citizens' initiatives require collective action in order to reach their goals, citizens' initiatives are always composed of citizens and show less diversity in actors than collective social enterprises do. Other actors or stakeholders can be involved with a citizens' initiative but operate from outside the initiative. Lastly, we prefer to use the concept of 'citizens' initiatives' as a form of social enterprise because it is close to the situation and concept used in the Dutch context (*'burgerinitiatieven'*).

Some studies have shown that in rural areas in particular, citizens' initiatives have the potential to replace pressurized services and foster the resilience and empowerment of these rural communities (see, for example, Bock, 2016; Calderwood and Davies, 2013; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Munoz et al., 2015; Salemin and Strijker, 2016). At the same time, criticism has arisen based on the question of whether citizens' initiatives can carry the responsibility of replacing pressurized (former public) services and whether it should be expected of them (Sud et al., 2009). However, relatively little is known about when a citizens' initiative is perceived as successful by various stakeholders and how successful operations and actions of these initiatives can be enabled. Our previous research on defining the success of citizens' initiatives from the perspective of professionals showed that professionals, including government officials, consider initiatives successful first and foremost when the citizens contribute to collective action and when they are in charge of the initiative (De Haan et al., 2017). However, the question remains whether the actors who are in charge share this perception of success. Therefore, this paper addresses the perspective of the citizens who have started citizens' initiatives. Based on survey data gathered in rural areas of the northern Netherlands from 585 citizens' initiatives, this study investigated which factors are important for successful citizens' initiatives in order to answer the following main research questions: *How do founders of citizens' initiatives define the success of initiatives in general, and which factors are perceived as contributing to the success of their own initiative?* 'Defining success' refers to the idea that the perception of success depends on subjective and collective experiences that are, first, related to a number of factors concerning the community-led development and second, related to the context in which the initiative is embedded (such as rural areas).

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Moreover, the perception of success consists of descriptions of actions and judgements in particular. Therefore, success was explored by introducing a number of factors and a scale describing their importance (from 'very unimportant for success' to 'very important for success').

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Conceptualizing successful citizens' initiatives

In rural areas, a great variety of services are organized and maintained by citizens. This study addresses citizens' initiatives that aim to improve liveability by the maintenance of former public services, for example, initiatives that take care of a public green area (shaping places) or manage local swimming pools (health) or public meeting places (social well-being). The goals of these initiatives are to solve or relieve the issues that rural areas currently face, such as building vacancies, impoverishment, the decline of primary services and the secondary function of services, i.e., meeting places (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; Steiner and Atterton, 2014). Although citizens' initiatives are a form of social enterprise, their focus is less on business principles.

Thus far, there is little literature on the conceptualization of the success of citizens' initiatives from the perspective of the founders themselves (De Haan et al., 2017). Most studies on social enterprise and citizens' initiatives have explored the range of factors that influence success from an 'outside' view (Jones and Little, 2000; Lambri and Petrescu, 2016; Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink and Strijker, 2016; Taló et al., 2014; Wiseman, 2006). De Haan et al. (2017) developed a theoretical understanding of success based on previous research. They distinguish three different levels of success: success at the community level (addressing the needs of the community), success at the network level (network relations contributing to success), and success at the organizational or participant level (finding resources and developing skills). This approach towards success implies that the concept is related to several aspects and that multiple perspectives on success can be distinguished, making it relevant to investigate the perspectives of different stakeholders.

De Haan et al. (2017) furthermore focused on the perception of success from the perspective of professionals. Based on focus-group discussions with both policy professionals and what Weatherley and Lipsky (1977) would refer to as 'street-level bureaucrats' - government officials interacting directly with citizens - it appears that the success of an initiative is not necessarily related to achieving set goals; rather, the process was said to be of greater importance. The professionals perceived initiatives as successful if the initiative participants contribute to collective action and are in charge of the initiative. They stressed that many skills and much knowledge can be obtained through the social learning experiences involved in taking part in the process of an initiative, and these were seen as important aspects of success, even when the goals were not (or not yet) achieved.

The sparse literature on understanding the success of citizens' initiatives as a contextual concept neglects the different perceptions of failure as well. This situation may imply that success and failure are on a continuum, where not being successful can be understood as failure and the further an initiative moves away from being successful, the closer it moves towards failure.

Given the issues that rural areas face and the pressure that is placed on services and liveability as a result, it seems that more is at stake when citizens' initiatives fail. Successful citizens' initiatives in rural areas can result in more than merely service provision. Several side-effects benefit rural communities as a whole, such as personal development and social learning (Bosworth et al., 2015; Salemink, 2016), empowerment (De Haan et al., 2017; Steiner and Farmer, 2017), resilience (Steiner and Atterton, 2014) and development of a sense of community (Nowell and Boyd, 2014; Taló et al., 2014).

2.2. Citizens' initiatives and factors influencing their success

To understand the relativity of success, which is at any time related to the geographical context and the type and capabilities of stakeholders, this paper explores which factors are defined as crucial by the founders of citizens' initiatives in the northern rural Dutch areas. After reviewing literature on the factors influencing the success of community-led local initiatives, we observe four overarching themes: the initiative's characteristics, functional success, social relations and input.

The first theme is the characteristics of the initiatives and the role these characteristics play in their success and failure. One aspect of this theme is the development phase of a given initiative. An initiative progresses through various phases over the course of its development (Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink, 2016). Initiatives start with a sense of urgency, in some cases as a result of government withdrawal or market failure (Salemink and Strijker, 2016). A group of people comes together, and an organizational structure is developed in several phases. In the final phase, the initiative becomes operational. According to these authors, passing through these phases ultimately leads to the establishment of a successful initiative, although these studies neglect a formal definition of the concept of success.

Other characteristics of an initiative follow from a specific consideration of the Dutch context. Verhoeven and Tonkens (2011) show that certain characteristics make some initiatives more successful than others. Examples of such characteristics are the duration of the participants' residence in the neighbourhood, the participants' connectedness with the neighbourhood and the type of goals an initiative has. Hurenkamp (2009) describes four different kinds of initiatives based on their internal and external communication levels: feather-light, networked, cooperative and nested. These four types are assumed to produce various forms of social cohesion within the community. However, Hurenkamp does not explore the relationship between these types of initiatives and the level of success in detail, although communication level may be a characteristic that contributes to an initiative's success.

The second theme relates to the concept of functional success. The functional success of an initiative refers to its output and performance, including the aspect of 'goal achievement'. Several authors implicitly refer to output as addressing unmet needs (Bock, 2016), transforming living conditions (Sotkasiira et al., 2010) and impacting the chosen field (Vickers, 1965). In defining the success of citizens' initiatives, achieving goals can be considered as an element of the *definition of success*. At the same time, there can be a *positive influence* of achieving goals on the perceived level of success.

The third theme considers the social relationships present within initiatives. Lambri and Petrescu (2016) argue that a good relationship amongst the founders adds to the likelihood of the initiative's success. In addition, the longer the members of a community group have been familiar with each other, the greater the number of initiatives started and the greater the success rates of these initiatives will be (Haggett and Aitken, 2015). Efflux is linked to these social relationships because it negatively influences trust and the relationships amongst founders. Negative experiences can cause founders to want to stop their activities (exit strategy) as opposed to giving voice to their concerns and staying involved (Hirschman, 1970). Another potential cause of efflux is volunteer burnout, which precedes an individual's intention to quit and therefore to stop his or her activities with the initiative (Allen and Mueller, 2013; Salemink, 2016).

In addition to social relationships within the initiatives, external social relationships can also play a role in the success of initiatives. This role becomes clear in examining social capital, a person's individual skills and connection to a wider network (Tregear and Cooper, 2016). Initiatives become more successful when their participants have strong social capital (Haggett and Aitken, 2015; Neumeier, 2012; Salemink and Strijker, 2016), which is necessary for building trust, building networks and getting initiatives started. Rural areas display stronger social networks than other areas (Steiner and Atterton, 2014), making

the rural setting a viable starting point for citizens' initiatives.

The fourth theme, input, considers many aspects related to the effort put into the initiative. The first aspect under this theme is the role of skills, which appears in several studies (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; Munoz et al., 2015; O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016; Salemink, 2016; Wiseman, 2006). The presence and use of skills is considered to lead to a positive effect on the likelihood of success. However, various types of skills are needed during different development phases. First, leadership skills are believed to be necessary for successful initiatives (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016; Wiseman, 2006), as is strategic or entrepreneurial thinking (O'Shaughnessy & O'Hara, 2016). This way of thinking contributes to the mobilization of resources that can benefit the outcomes of the initiative. Leadership at the local and regional levels can be more challenging than central leadership, making the role of local leaders in the rural context even more important (Beer, 2014). In addition to leadership, communication skills are considered a success factor because they optimize internal as well as external co-operation (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016).

The second aspect of the input theme is a sense of ownership, which is identified by several studies as an important positive influence on success (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016; Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink and Strijker, 2016; Wiseman, 2006). Multiple factors, such as setting an agenda that is based on the urgency of an initiative, can play a role in achieving a sense of ownership (Munoz et al., 2015; Wiseman, 2006). When a community decides on the priorities of an initiative, the community develops a sense of ownership as a result. Decision-making capacity also contributes to the sense of ownership (Lambru and Petrescu, 2016).

The third aspect related to input is the role of local governments in the success of initiatives (Hurenkamp et al., 2006; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2011; Wiseman, 2006). When the relationship between an initiative and local government functions well, success will be positively influenced (Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2011). The role of the government in such well-functioning relationships is twofold: governments are expected to provide opportunities for deploying initiatives and they are supposed to give up responsibilities in order to allow initiatives a chance of becoming successful (Hurenkamp et al., 2006). It must be noted that not all communities are capable of shouldering these new responsibilities (Steiner and Farmer, 2017). Additionally, financial and organizational support of local governments also influences the success of initiatives in a positive manner (Wiseman, 2006). These differing findings indicate how complicated it can be for local governments to positively support citizens' initiatives without creating obstacles to success.

The last input aspect, community support, refers to input from outside the initiative. Support from the community, i.e., more people standing behind an initiative, is believed to positively influence success (Munoz et al., 2015; Neumeier, 2012); contribute to initiatives coming into existence and establish their legitimacy. Similar to citizens' initiatives, community embeddedness is also important in shaping and continuing entrepreneurship (Jack and Anderson, 2002). Based on this literature study the following conceptual framework is developed (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of themes influencing three levels of success.

While discussing the literature on factors influencing the success of citizens' initiatives, we noted three things. First, most previous studies use qualitative data and take the perspective of stakeholders other than the founders of the citizens' initiative themselves. In this paper, we specifically address the perspective of founders.

Second, the literature does not necessarily focus on citizens' initiatives in a rural setting. Given the previously discussed need to resolve issues faced by rural areas and, consequently, the expectations regarding rural citizens' initiatives, the rural setting deserves specific attention. Furthermore, Jones and Little (2000) illustrate that good practices of transferring responsibilities in an urban setting do not necessarily have the same effect in rural areas. Therefore, we focus specifically on the functioning of citizens' initiatives in rural areas.

Third, the main focus of previous studies is nearly always on the positive effects on success, neglecting the negative effects. As it is important to focus not only on success stories (Uitermark, 2015), we include negative effects and unsuccessful initiatives in this study. In addition, the positive aspects of the role of citizens' initiatives in service provision are not undisputed. On the one hand, some authors warn of several downsides of service provision by citizens' initiatives (Jones and Little, 2000; Wiseman, 2006; Uitermark, 2015). Examples of these downsides are an increase in the unequal distribution of social and economic capital, power concentration, bureaucracy and the inability to adapt to socio-economic differences (Salemink and Strijker, 2016). It is argued that to prevent these effects, service provision should be mainly a state task. On the other hand, some authors stress the potential of citizens' initiatives to deliver services (Bock, 2016; Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; Healey, 2015). Citizens' initiatives can prevent rural marginalization and can provide higher-quality services because they have access to local knowledge that attunes the services to local needs.

With this study, we aim to add to the theoretical debate on citizens' initiatives in the rural context by including the perspective of the founders regarding both the conceptualization of successful initiatives in general and the self-evaluated success of their own initiative without neglecting the negative effects on success. In the following quantitative analysis, we used the above-described theory to cluster our variables into themes in order to construct a model for predicting the self-evaluated success.

3. Researching citizens' initiatives in the northern Netherlands

3.1. Research area and sample

The data presented in this paper were collected in the rural areas of the three northern provinces of the Netherlands, some of which are experiencing or expect to experience depopulation in the near future. In these areas, relatively more citizens' initiatives occur because of the depopulation and the pressure on services and facilities (Houwelingen et al., 2014). First, we created an inventory of initiatives that are or were active in the rural areas of the northern Netherlands. Information for this inventory was provided by local and regional governments, planning bureaus and an internet search conducted by the researchers. In addition, snowballing was used, in which the respondents who filled

out the questionnaire were asked whether they knew of other initiatives in the area.

To reach a large sample in an efficient manner and to make responding convenient for the respondents, a digital questionnaire was distributed via e-mail (Dillman et al., 2014; Sue and Ritter, 2007). However, for some initiatives, no e-mail addresses were available. These initiatives received an invitation by traditional mail with a link to the digital questionnaire. We preferred to direct these respondents to the digital questionnaire rather than to a hard-copy version because of the additional costs and the extra effort required for respondents to return printed questionnaires. The link to the questionnaire was also posted on two websites that we expected the potential respondents to visit.

The invitation for the questionnaire stated the purpose of the research and guaranteed the anonymity of the participants. To increase the response rate, three randomly selected participants were rewarded with a €20 voucher. A reminder was sent to those initiatives that had not yet responded two weeks after they had received the first e-mail invitation. The initiatives that were approached by traditional mail did not receive a reminder for technical reasons. However, because they only formed a small part of the inventory, we believe the lack of a reminder did not significantly influence the sample.

The questionnaire was aimed at the person who was currently the leader of the initiative based on the assumption that he or she would be able to provide information about the entire initiative and would have the best overview of its activities. The disadvantage of asking this person to answer the questions is that events may occur outside the purview of the group's leader, making him or her unaware of certain aspects of the initiative. Additionally, the person in the lead may have different perspectives and opinions from other participants. These aspects should be considered when interpreting the results, as the leader may have more insights and greater access to information. The invitation stated a preference for the person leading the initiative to answer the questions. All initiatives within the inventory received only one invitation and were asked once to fill out the questionnaire. Since the questionnaire included the name of the initiative, it was possible to check whether multiple questionnaires per initiative were returned, and we found that such duplication did not occur.

A limitation of the inventory surfaced when we considered the visibility of citizens' initiatives. For the inventory, we relied on informants from local and regional governments and planning bureaus. Those informants provided most of the input for the inventory (see Table 1). The informants noted that there are also – in many cases smaller-scale – citizens' initiatives that operate without governmental or other forms of support, such as funding or professional help. These initiatives in general remained unknown to our informants and were therefore not part of the inventory. The invisibility of this type of initiatives has also been noted by Green and Goetting (2010). By adopting the snowball method, we tried to minimize this bias. However, we are aware that our sample may not represent an exhaustive list of citizens' initiatives in the research area. Given the wide variety of initiatives and the large number in the sample, we believe that our findings are representative despite this limitation.

In total, 623 initiatives were included in the inventory, of which 491 received an invitation to complete the questionnaire by e-mail and 95 by traditional mail. Thirty-seven e-mail addresses and one postal address no longer existed, and no other contact details were found,

resulting in a total of 585 invited initiatives. Of these, 157 respondents completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 26.8%. Although both active and inactive citizens' initiatives were included in the inventory, the questionnaire was predominantly completed by founders of active initiatives (86%).

The questionnaire consisted of four parts regarding success and failure. First, it inquired about the *general characteristics* of the initiative, such as size, life span, people involved and whether it was currently active. Second, following the general questions, the respondents were asked to *evaluate the performance of their initiative*. The third part consisted of questions regarding what *factors they thought had influenced the success or failure* of their initiative. Fourth, the respondents were asked to *evaluate the success and failure of initiatives in general*, regardless of their own initiative. The following section describes the operationalizations used to transform the three levels of success and the four themes of conditions for success within the literature into variables for our analysis.

3.2. Operationalizations and analysis

The respondents were asked to evaluate the performance of their initiative. '*Self-evaluated success*' was operationalized by asking the respondents, on a scale from 1 to 10, to what extent they considered their own initiative a success. On average, the respondents rated their own initiative at 7.89 ($n = 157$; $s.d. = 1.82$).

Contrasting the *self-evaluated success* of their own initiative, the respondents were asked how they perceived the success of citizens' initiatives in general. To construct a *conceptualization of success*, the respondents were presented with 16 statements in the fourth part of the questionnaire that could relate to successful or failed initiatives. The respondents were asked to indicate to what extent each statement was important to them in describing successful initiatives, regardless of their evaluation of their own initiative. The statements consisted of the aspects related to functional success and input described in the theory section, such as the role of achieving goals, representativeness of the community, the role of skills and other characteristics of initiatives, to enable a comparison of the perspectives of professionals and founders. The respondents indicated on a scale from 1 to 5 ('1 – very unimportant for success' to '5 – very important for success') to what extent, in their opinion, each aspect contributed to defining success. The conceptualizations of success were constructed using principal component analysis (PCA). Using the Varimax rotation method, the 16 variables were added to the analysis. Variables scoring higher than 0.40 in the component analysis were added to the scale, each representing one conceptualization of success. Three perspectives of success conceptualization were constructed. Six variables did not score high enough to improve the scales and were omitted.

Using regression analysis, we constructed a model for predicting success. Based on the aspects discussed in the literature review, 27 variables regarding success and failure factors were clustered into five themes (see Table 2) and where necessary recoded into dummies (Field, 2005). The first four themes are based on the four themes of factors influencing success: initiative characteristics, functional success, social relationships and input. A fifth theme was added based on the success and failure factors the respondents suggested. In answering an open question, the respondents could indicate what factors influenced the success or failure of their own initiative.

Control variables were added to the analysis in an additional theme. The variables controlled the analysis for the influence of gender, age, the presence of newcomers vs. locals and education levels. All the control variables were measured at the level of the initiative and were an estimate of the respondents of this study. The five themes were added to the regression analysis using the forward method. Using the theory-led themes as well as this entry method allowed the regression model to be based on both theoretical and statistical relevance. The conditions for using regression analysis were checked, and no

Table 1
Number of suggestions by origin of source.

Source	No. of suggestions concerning an initiative
Local and regional governments	578
Planning bureaus	30
Respondents	15

Table 2

Themes and variables for regression analysis (dependent variable is 'self-evaluated success').

Theme	Question/Variable	Variable characteristics
Initiative characteristics	No. of years of existence	Numeric
	Development phase	5 answer options
	No. of people involved	Numeric
	No. of contact moments	Numeric
	Time investment of initiative leader	Numeric (hours per week)
	Type of goals	Open – 13 dummy categories
	Levels of communication	4 answer options
Functional success	Type of financing	4 answer options
	Currently active	Yes/No
	Goal achievement	Scale 1-5
	Embeddedness within community	4 answer options
	When satisfied with initiative	4 answer options
	Reputation	Scale 1-5
	Continuation by others in case of stopping	Yes/No
Social relationships	Who started initially	8 answer options
	Familiar with each other before starting	4 answer options
	Stopped members	Yes/No
	Intentions to quit	4 answer options
	Social capital	Scale 1-5
Input	No. of professionals	Numeric
	Involvement of government/organizations	8 answer options
	Community support	Yes/No
	Who has say over the initiative	7 answer options
	Feeling responsible for goal achievement	Scale 1-5
	Knowledge and skills	Scale 1-5
	Leadership	Yes/No
Respondents' suggestions	Success factors present in initiative	Open – 11 dummy categories
	Failure factors present in initiative	Open – 10 dummy categories

inconsistencies were found. The following section presents the results of both the PCA and the regression analysis.

3.3. Characteristics of the sample

A typology of the initiatives was created based on the categories provided by Verhoeven and Tonkens (2011), in which, for example, educational initiatives refer to initiatives that aim to inform specific groups about a topic, and spatial adaptation initiatives improve the infrastructure of the neighbourhood. In Table 3, the initiatives are

Table 3
Typology of citizens' initiatives in the sample.

Main goal	%
Social cohesion	21.0
Education	3.2
Culture	3.2
Spatial adaptation	22.3
Sports	5.1
Youth	1.3
Liveability	12.1
Service delivery	31.2
Missing	0.6

divided by the category that refers to their main goal. In the regression analysis, presented in the following section, multiple goals are considered. The sample showed that, indeed, many citizens' initiatives in Dutch rural areas focus on delivering a service, namely, 31.2%. Additionally, many initiatives aim to improve social cohesion (21%) and liveability (12.1%).

The people involved with citizens' initiatives have been found to be predominantly highly educated men of an older age (50+) (Choi, 2003; McMunn et al., 2009; Munoz et al., 2014; Warburton and Stirling, 2007). In reviewing the characteristics of the initiatives in our sample, we found that the people who were active within the initiatives were more often male (60.4%). Regarding the age distribution, we observed that the age groups of 30–50 (48.4%) and 50 to 65 (45.2%) were nearly equally represented within the initiatives. The initiatives were dominated by citizens who had lived in the area for more than five years, and the participation of locals and newcomers was unequally distributed. On average, the initiatives were made up of 84.8% locals and 15.2% newcomers.

4. Results

This section presents the findings from the questionnaire data and consists of two subsections. First, the conceptualizations of success are presented, derived from the PCA. Second, the factors influencing success based on the regression analysis are described.

4.1. Founders' conceptualizations of success

Using PCA, clusters of variables were created, revealing three perspectives on success in general: success at the network level, the organizational level and the participant level. These perspectives show parallels with the levels of success described by Provan and Milward (2001) but with the organizational and participant levels as separate approaches towards success. The perspectives and their components are presented in Table 4.

First, the perspective of success at the network level includes aspects that refer to the relationships outside the initiative itself. According to this perspective, initiatives are more successful when they represent the neighbourhood or village, when people from outside the initiative participate as well, and when the initiative is known outside the village where it is situated.

Second, in contrast to success at the network level, the perspective on success at the organizational level focuses on the internal characteristics of the initiative. The respondents indicated that when the

Table 4

Results of principal component analysis – three conceptualizations of successful citizens' initiatives.

Success perspective	Variables	Cronbach's alpha
Success at the network level	Representative of the neighbourhood/village People from the area participate as well Visibility of the initiative outside the village	0.737
Success at the Organizational level	Founders taking responsibility Social capital Trust amongst each other Founders are in control	0.719
Success at the participant level	Developing skills Collective action more important than achieving goals Being a catalyst for other initiatives	0.691

Table 5

Results of regression analysis with the dependent variable ‘how do you rate the success of your initiative on a scale from 1 to 10’.

Theme	Variable	Standardized beta	Sig.
Initiative characteristics	Number of people involved	0.085	0.202
	Development phase	0.164	0.014
	Feather-light initiatives	-0.237	0.001
	Cooperative initiatives	-0.166	0.011
	Goals – preventing vacancies/building re-use	-0.226	0.000
Functional success	Goals achieved	0.416	0.000
Input	No involvement with financial means (government/societal organizations)	-0.134	0.040
Respondents' suggestions	Failure factor: lack of funds	0.149	0.018
	Failure factor: interaction with government	-0.134	0.037
Adjusted R2		0.552	

founders take responsibility for the initiative and when social capital is highly present within it, the initiative is considered to be more successful. Additionally, trust amongst the founders and being in control are said to be aspects of being successful.

The third perspective, success at the participant level, considers the side effects that may accompany initiatives. In contrast to the first two approaches, this perspective focuses on the individual level of the initiatives' participants. Developing personal skills, being active within the initiative – even when the goals are not immediately met – and creating a stimulus for starting new initiatives all determine the success of the initiative according to the respondents' perspective. Success is therefore determined not by the core activities of an initiative but by the effects that result from those activities.

4.2. Factors influencing success

Using regression analysis, a model to predict the extent of self-evaluated success has been built. Employing the forward method, independent variables to the analysis in five themes are added. Table 5 presents the results of the analysis with the optimal model for predicting the success of citizens' initiatives. The table includes the variables that contribute significantly to the model; the excluded variables are also presented in Table 2. We will present these results following the five themes of analysis. However, the variables of the theme regarding social relationships did not significantly contribute to the model. This theme will be discussed last.

4.2.1. Initiative characteristics

The variables that are related to the initiative characteristics contributed most significantly to the self-evaluated success of the respondents' own initiative. The number of people involved in the initiative did not have a significant influence on success. Even when we controlled for a mediating or moderating relationship with the type of initiative (goal), we found no significant or strong relationships between the group size and the type of goal. These results indicate that whether many people were involved in a large initiative or a small group of people was involved in a smaller-scale initiative, for this sample, the group size did not influence the self-evaluated success.

The development phase does influence the self-evaluated success. The respondents evaluated their initiative as more successful once it was developed further. Once an initiative has progressed through the first development phases, the participants judge it to be more successful. However, the better the communication among members

functions, the more successful the initiative is considered. Feather-light and cooperative initiatives were less likely to be evaluated as successful, and both types have low degrees of communication with the world outside the initiative. Thus, the network surrounding the initiative seems to contribute to its success.

The type of initiative also influences the perception of success. The respondents from initiatives focusing on preventing building vacancies or on the re-use of empty buildings appeared to conceive them as less successful. This finding may be related to the complexity of these types of initiatives because they involve (complex) legislation. However, financial risks and ownership structures also play an important role in the complexity of this kind of initiative.

4.2.2. Functional success

For the theme ‘functional success’, only goal achievement appeared to be significant. The more the participants appreciated the achievement of goals, the more they rated the initiative as successful. This variable has the largest regression coefficient in the prediction model and seems to play the most important role in the self-evaluated success. The other variables relating to the self-evaluated success were not included in the model.

4.2.3. Input

When there was no involvement of a government or societal organization in terms of finances, this absence negatively impacted the self-evaluated success, illustrating that interaction with the (local) government and other societal organizations (e.g., housing corporations) influenced the self-evaluated success. However, the answers of the respondents to the open questions about success and failure factors indicated other aspects of the governmental role. These results will be discussed in detail in section 4.3.4.

The variables ‘community support’ and ‘having a say over the initiative’, both belonging to the theme ‘input’, were not included in the model. Based on our previous study, this finding was unexpected, as the perspective of professionals highly stresses these aspects, relating to the process of initiatives, as important for success (De Haan et al., 2017). The absence of these variables indicates the differences in perspective between the professionals and the founders.

4.2.4. Respondents' suggestions

The respondents suggested several factors that influence the failure of citizens' initiatives. Two of these factors were significantly influential in predicting the self-evaluated success. First, the role of the government was indicated as a negative influence on the self-evaluated success. In the input theme, a lack of government involvement in terms of finances was perceived as a failure factor. In contrast to governments as suppliers of funds, the presence of the government is perceived as a failure factor under this theme. Moreover, lack of support, bureaucracy, slow pace, and mistrust were provided as examples of negative relationships between initiatives and (local) governments. Respondents who indicated the government as a failure factor also reported lower evaluations of the success of their initiative. We can conclude that the relationship with other institutions is a determinant of successful initiatives that influences them both negatively and positively. Therefore, our findings regarding the role of the government were contradictory. The government is expected to be involved in providing funds, leading to higher ratings of success. However, if there were negative incidents or experiences, the relationship with the government was a negative influence in how the respondents evaluated their initiative's success.

The second significant failure factor indicated by the respondents was a lack of funds. The role of this failure factor stands out in the analysis. Surprisingly, a positive relationship was found between this indicated failure factor and the self-evaluated success: the respondents who indicated a lack of funds as a negative influence on the outcome of their initiative gave higher ratings to the success of their initiative. We expected to find a negative influence in this regard, with an indicated lack of funds

resulting in lower self-evaluated success. A possible explanation for this contradiction is the commitment and skills that are necessary for a lack of funds to become an issue. Being involved with an initiative to such an extent that a founder worries about finances may require a high level of commitment. Although the finances could be troublesome, the involvement and effort of the founders could improve the quality of the initiative to such an extent that the financial drawbacks would be diminished. Furthermore, most respondents indicated in their answers to this question that they viewed a lack of funding as a potential threat and as something they worry about. They did not indicate that there was an actual lack of funds for their initiative at that time.

4.2.5. Social relationships

The variables of one of the themes, social relationships, did not contribute to the model of the self-evaluated success of citizens' initiatives. Since the variables of all the other themes are included in the model, it is striking that social relationships seem to be of importance theoretically but do not play a role in the self-evaluated success. We can conclude from this finding that social dynamics and group processes overall do not contribute significantly to the self-evaluated success of citizens' initiatives.

One possible explanation for the absence of social relationship variables in the model may be that the respondents in the sample rate their initiatives' success rather high (average of 7.89). Although both active and inactive initiatives are included in the sample, in general, the sample consists of rather successful initiatives. It may be possible that when initiatives are perceived as less successful, social relationships play a role. Negative social relationships might prevent initiatives from becoming successful or might inhibit their progress.

Another potential explanation may be found in the respondents. As noted above, each questionnaire was answered by one person leading the initiative because those leaders were expected to be able to provide the most complete information on the initiatives as a whole. It may be that issues relating to the variables of the social relationships theme (e.g., intentions to quit or social capital) in some cases occur outside the purview of the respondent or that the respondent is unaware of the importance of (one of) these aspects for other participants in the initiative.

In summary, the founders adopt three different perspectives on conceptualizing success similar to the classification in the literature: success at the network level, success at the organizational level and success at the participant level. In addition to constructing general conceptualizations of success, the respondents evaluated the success of their own initiative, with a score of 7.89 on average (1–10 scale). Goal achievement seemed to be the most important factor influencing the self-evaluated success, which is remarkable because it is not part of the conceptualization of success. We conclude that achieving goals is an important aspect that influences the self-evaluated success of a founder's own initiative but is not part of the conceptualization of the success of citizens' initiatives in general. 'Initiatives' characteristics received the most support and included the number of people involved, the development phase, communication levels and type of goals. Aspects related to the social relationships of an initiative were unexpectedly not found to influence the self-evaluated success.

5. Conclusions

Investigations of the founders' perspective on successful citizens' initiatives have revealed parallels with the existing body of literature on understanding success (Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2015, 2016; Calderwood and Davies, 2013; Herranz, 2010; Nowell and Boyd, 2014; Provan and Milward, 2001; Salemink, 2016; Taló et al., 2014; De Haan et al., 2017). Where the professionals adopt solely the participant level of success, the founders also consider other perspectives on conceptualizing success. For them, success includes the impact on the world outside the initiative (success at the network level) and the internal characteristics of the initiative (success at the organizational level) as well. However,

when the founders judged their own initiative, the general conceptualizations appeared to be of lesser importance, with goal achievement and initiative characteristics as the most important factors explaining the self-evaluated success. Several previous studies noted the importance of goal achievement (Bock, 2016; Sotkasiira et al., 2010; Vickers, 1965), so it is surprising to find this result is not more acknowledged by the professionals involved with citizens' initiatives (De Haan et al., 2017). Moreover, the importance of goal achievement highlights the potential reason to start initiatives and whether goals can and will be achieved and relates to the financial feasibility of initiatives, an important indicator for providing funding. Furthermore, if citizens' initiatives are meant to replace services, it is important that the actual goal of replacing the service is achieved. This output-based approach illustrates the strong link with social entrepreneurship: in order to achieve goals, business principles can be applied, resulting in better feasibility of initiatives. This link seems to have not (yet) been applied by local governments and professionals given their 'soft' approach towards citizens' initiatives (De Haan et al., 2017) where a more business-like model perhaps would lead to better results.

The fact that professionals emphasized empowerment, social learning and collective action in their definition of successful citizens' initiatives in our previous study (De Haan et al., 2017) may indicate an idealization of the social aspects of citizens' initiatives by professionals. The importance of social relations for successful citizens' initiatives was nevertheless illustrated by other authors (Allen and Mueller, 2013; Haggett and Aitken, 2015; Lambri and Petrescu, 2016; Salemink, 2016). The discrepancy with our current findings, that social relations did not receive support in predicting the self-evaluated success, can be explained by the fact that our sample included initiatives that had already progressed through the first phases of starting an initiative (Munoz et al., 2015; Salemink, 2016). Starting an initiative may require having social relations already in place, making this no longer relevant once the initiative is operating.

Despite our attempt to include inactive initiatives in this study, our results are mainly representative of active citizens' initiatives. The processes of inactive or failed citizens' initiatives and how to prevent or support struggling initiatives thus require more investigation and will be a topic of future research. Nevertheless, these results are relevant for improving our understanding of how to facilitate citizens' initiatives and for providing insight into the complicated relationships between citizens' initiatives and governments in particular. Governments can play an important role in helping initiatives financially, making them more successful. At the same time, a troubled relationship between the government and the initiative was indicated as an important failure factor for initiatives. This tendency was also formulated in the theoretical debate within the Dutch setting (Hurenkamp et al., 2006; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2011) but was not specified for rural areas. The findings show that the role changes (see, for example, Bosworth et al., 2016; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Pestoff, 2012; Van Meerkerk et al., 2013) that are required in the context of the participation society have not yet been fully implemented and, moreover, have become an obstacle to the success of citizens' initiatives in rural areas. This discrepancy is similar to what Meijer (2016) indicates as an institutional misfit because of the changing roles of both government and citizens. Responsibilities and roles have changed; however, old patterns of behaviour remain. Improving the relationship between government and citizens' initiatives, and ultimately improving the success of citizens' initiatives, is likely to require implementation of these necessary role changes.

Lastly, the question remains as to what extent citizens' initiatives can be seen as a stable and long-term alternative for rural service provision. From our findings, we deduce that role changes and professionalization are necessary. However, in line with the doubts Sud et al. (2009) formulated regarding the capability of social enterprises to resolve social issues, one can seriously question whether founders of citizen initiatives in rural areas have sufficient capabilities to form a long-term alternative for rural service provision.

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