

University of Groningen

'At some point it has been enough' - Processes of perceived failure of citizens' initiatives

Meerstra-de Haan, Erzsi; Meier, Sabine; Bulder, Elles; Haartsen, Tialda

Published in:
 Sociologia Ruralis

DOI:
[10.1111/soru.12282](https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12282)

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:
 2020

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

Citation for published version (APA):

Meerstra-de Haan, E., Meier, S., Bulder, E., & Haartsen, T. (2020). 'At some point it has been enough' - Processes of perceived failure of citizens' initiatives. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 60(1), 260-283.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12282>

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.

'At some point it has been enough' - Processes of perceived failure of citizens' initiatives

Erzsi Meerstra-de Haan *, Sabine Meier, Elles Bulder and
Tialda Haartsen

Abstract

Citizens' initiatives are believed to be a suitable alternative approach to service provision, especially in rural areas where services are under pressure because of depopulation and decentralisation measures of the state. To date, research has mainly focused on best practices and successful examples of these initiatives. However, understanding failure is equally important in order to learn more about the processes citizens' initiatives go through, the chances of success and to develop tools for the support needed. This article focuses on the perception of initiators of citizens' initiatives on failure. Within the relevant body of literature, six obstacles to the success of citizens' initiatives stand out. In order to understand the processes of failure in more detail, we investigated three case studies on failed citizens' initiatives in the Northern Netherlands. The following aspects seem to be of vital importance to whether or not a citizens' initiative fails: 1) how governments and (semi-) governmental organisations interact with the citizens' initiative; 2) how people are able to balance the different needs for senses of ownership and responsibility; and 3) how participants are able to balance personal investments. Finally, the interviewed initiators justify failure as a discrepancy of scale caused by different scopes of actions of local and regional governments and housing corporations at the regional level, and citizens' initiatives, at the local level. To overcome this discrepancy, citizens' initiatives require tailor-made and context-specific support.

Introduction

Local transport to schools, a village living room, community shops and community gardens: these and other examples of successful citizens' initiatives are often discussed in the media and have been subjected to numerous evaluations

© 2019 The Authors. *Sociologia Ruralis* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of European Society for Rural Sociology

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

Sociologia Ruralis, Vol 60, Number 1, January 2020

DOI: 10.1111/soru.12282

(see for example: Bultsma *et al.* 2015; Groninger Dorpen 2015; Visser *et al.* 2016; Drent 2017; Jonker-Verkaart and Lupi 2017; Provincie Groningen 2017; van der Veen 2017). In the context of the Big Society, in which citizen participation in services and policy is promoted (Espejo and Bendek 2011), local and regional governments encourage the transfer of responsibilities to citizens' initiatives because of their potential to create customised alternatives in public service provision (Jones and Little 2000; Brannan *et al.* 2006; Shucksmith *et al.* 2006; Cheshire and Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Thiede *et al.* 2017). A drawback of the existing body of literature on citizens' initiatives is that the focus is mostly on successful initiatives (Wandersman 2009; Taló *et al.* 2014; Meijer 2017). This focus results in a bias towards best practices and leaves the processes and consequences of unsuccessful citizens' initiatives under-researched, while looking into failure can actually contribute to establishing more successful initiatives (Meijer 2017). In particular, understanding the conditions, the various factors and the different development phases of processes which have led to (or are perceived as) failure in detail can be relevant for learning more about citizens' initiatives. Although some factors that contribute to the failure of citizens' initiatives have been identified in studies on best practices (de Haan *et al.* 2018a), the interrelatedness of these factors and the failure process has thus far been neglected in research.

The aim of this article is to shed light on the processes that lead to the failure of citizens' initiatives. The focus is not merely on factors contributing to failure as such. Rather, these factors or aspects influence the ways roles, responsibilities and actions are taken within the different development phases of the process. By investigating and analysing three cases within depopulating areas in the northern rural areas of the Netherlands, the following research question will be answered: *How can the processes by which citizens' initiatives fail be described and explained?* The cases are examples of what we call failed citizens' initiatives, as the initiators perceive them as such. We focus on their perceptions of the whole process, their struggles and the reasons for not being successful given by the initiators themselves. Here, failure does not automatically mean that the initiatives have stopped entirely. This article first explores the existing literature on citizens' initiatives and factors influencing their failure, followed by a description of the methods used and the findings of the case-study. Finally, the conclusions regarding failed citizens' initiatives are presented.

Understanding failure of citizens' initiatives

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

2006; Rosol 2012; Calderwood and Davies 2013). We define citizens' initiatives as *formally or informally organized groups of citizens who are active in and contribute to the public domain* (de Haan *et al.* 2018b).

In the relevant body of literature, different developmental phases were distinguished (Munoz *et al.* 2015; Saleminck and Strijker 2016). First of all, initiatives start with an idea and can have different motives for starting, such as out of necessity or by the willingness to address a need within the community (1). This is followed by a phase that identifies the needs and goals in more detail and where support from the community is gathered (2). Next, the group takes shape. People join the group of initiators and tasks are identified and distributed (3). The plans are further developed and the formal organisation type (e.g., a co-operative) is established (4). The final phase includes the initiative being operative (5). Each of these stages includes specific barriers and chances, for example whether or not community support is gained at stage 2. Moreover, an initiative can seize its activities in any of the stages. Whether seizing of activities can be seen as failure is explored in the following. Furthermore, a number of studies have dealt with the success of citizens' initiatives and the factors influencing success (see, for example, Allen and Mueller 2013; Beer 2014; Haggett and Aitken 2015; Lambrou and Petrescu 2016; Munoz *et al.* 2015; Neumeier 2012; O'Shaughnessy and O'Hara 2016; Saleminck 2016; Saleminck and Strijker 2016; Steiner and Atterton 2014; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2011; Wiseman 2006). However, within these studies, an explicit definition of failure of citizens' initiatives is lacking. Nevertheless, studies from related fields have looked into this field and have developed the concept of failure further.

In particular, studies on non-profit organisations (NPO's) have dealt with failure as an opposite phenomenon of success. We argue that citizens' initiatives have parallels with non-profit organisations, as both have social objectives. Social objectives and the extent to which these objectives have been accomplished, indicating the level of success, can be complicated to measure (Helmig *et al.* 2014). Measuring the level of success or failure in the for-profit sector does not entail these difficulties, as objective measures can be adopted, i.e., profit maximisation or profitability. Furthermore, poor financial performance or a lack of resources does not necessarily point towards failure for NPO's. Looking at failure of NPO's in terms of organisational failure also does not resolve the issue, as the organisation seizing to exist can also be a sign of achieving the social objective, and as such be a success. Following from Helmig *et al.* (2014), failure of citizens' initiatives can best be understood as not achieving the objectives of the initiatives. However, this notion is difficult to measure objectively and leaves out a timeframe in which goal achievement should take place.

Looking into the literature of policy evaluations, the concept of failure has also been explored, providing starting points for understanding the concept of failure of citizens' initiatives. McConnell (2010) illustrates how success and failure of policies can be seen as a spectrum, in which failing in one aspect does not necessarily mean failure of the entire policy measure. This seems to apply to citizens' initiatives as well: failing in one aspect, for example not receiving a particular subsidy, does not mean the entire initiative has failed. Furthermore, McConnell defines failure in a way that can also be compatible with citizens' initiatives: policy has failed when the prospected goals are not achieved and when support is lacking or opposition is extensive. Both the NPO and policy evaluation approach share a focus on goal achievement.

Following from both approaches towards failure, we understand failure of citizens' initiatives as not achieving their goal in combination with a lack of support from the community or stakeholders involved.

Obstacles and risks for citizens' initiatives

In order to understand processes of failure for citizen initiatives in more detail, the present study focuses on perceived failure as defined by the initiators and perceived by the stakeholders involved. Similar to the field of policy evaluation and political actions evaluations, it is likely that failure is related to not achieving the goals of the initiative and that success and failure function on a continuum: not being successful to a certain extent implies that the citizens' initiative has failed (de Haan *et al.* 2018a; McConnell 2010). Initiatives that never materialise due to a lack of social capital, sense of urgency or low educational levels, for example, can also be considered as failures (Salemink and Strijker 2018). However, the focus of this article is explicitly on citizens' initiatives that have started and progressed in their development but are perceived to have failed by the initiators themselves. In reviewing the body of literature on the failure of citizens' initiatives in rural areas, several contributing factors emerge. Additionally, the absence of factors identified as success factors (de Haan *et al.* 2018a, 2018b), such as a lack of skills within the initiators group or an insufficient social or professional network, could be considered a factor in failure. We argue that certain factors - in the sense of characteristics which shape the scope of action of the initiative and its actors, their roles and responsibilities - can contribute to failure. These factors or aspects can be differently effective in the different phases of the process. Based on the literature review, six aspects appear to create the largest obstacles and risks to citizens' initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government and existing and changing policies.

As citizens' initiatives often pursue goals which concern interests of a community, the initiative should take care of representing this community. **Not representing their community** can entail the ending of the initiative not only at an early stage, but also later on, when the initiative is (close to) delivering results. Representation of a community can take two forms: representation of the composition of the community and representation of the interests of the community. Regarding representation of the community's composition, Tonkens and Verhoeven (2018) note that representation within citizens' initiatives is largely distributed unequally, as highly educated, white, male, middle-aged community members are usually overrepresented. Nevertheless, representation plays an important role in the success and failure of citizens' initiatives because it supports the community in developing and improving its initiatives. Edelenbos *et al.* (2016) further illustrate the importance of representing the interests of the community. Representing the interests of the community provides the initiative with legitimacy and thus increases its chances of success. Not being representative of the community can lead to a loss of legitimacy and often results in the failure of citizens' initiatives. In every stage of the development of citizens' initiatives, representation, and as such legitimacy for the initiatives, is of importance.

Another aspect of failure that is often highlighted in the existing literature is **volunteer burnout**. Citizens' initiatives can fail when participants stop their activities, and

one cause of such stoppage is volunteer burnout. This aspect particularly seems to play a role in the fifth development phase, when the initiative is operative, however, volunteer burnout can develop at any time during participation within a citizens' initiative. Being involved with a citizens' initiative can place immense pressure on the participants because they invest so much of their time, energy and skills in the initiative. Experiencing too much strain as a result of their participation in the initiative can lead to volunteer burnout and may cause the participants to quit their activities entirely (Allen and Mueller 2013; Salemink and Strijker 2016).

The **scale**, in the sense of geographical reach, scope of actions and responsibilities, at which the initiatives operate can also influence failure. Citizens' initiatives mostly operate at the local level and are more likely to succeed at that level. Sometimes, the goals of citizens' initiatives concern the regional level, e.g. maintaining public transport for a region. Operating at the regional level involves a higher level of complexity for the citizens' initiatives, since more complex and increasingly diverse legislation is required and generating support becomes more complicated. Moreover, given the increased complexity, regional level initiatives require more of the capabilities of the initiators and increasingly more resources can be necessary (which are mostly scarce) (Meijer 2018; Salemink and Strijker 2018). This aspect can become an obstacle throughout different development phases. For instance, it can be more complicated to gain community support (stage 2) when the initiative has complicated plans or when support of a large group is needed. Also in forming the initiator-group (stage 3) it can be difficult to find people with the right skills or willingness to participate. When the plans are developed in more detail (stage 4), the scale influences the complexity of the plan making it difficult to shape plans for regional level initiatives.

Insufficient financial means is another factor that can contribute to failure (de Haan *et al.* 2018a; Salemink and Strijker 2016, 2018). Especially in the phase where the plans are developed (stage 4), depending on the type of initiative, insufficient financial means can form an obstacle (de Haan *et al.* 2018a; Munoz *et al.* 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016, 2018). Once the goals are set and a stable group has formed, it is essential to secure sufficient funding to continue to develop further and achieve the initiative's goals. In general, an important source of funding is local and regional governments. Lack of financial involvement from these governments can have a negative influence on the success of citizens' initiatives (de Haan *et al.* 2018a). The importance of finances is not always acknowledged by professionals who, in some cases, focus mostly on the positive side effects of the development of citizens' initiatives, such as learning experiences for the participants (de Haan *et al.* 2018b).

The **relationship between citizens' initiatives and the government** stands out as a critical factor when analysing the failure of citizens' initiatives. The success of citizens' initiatives largely depends on the (financial) support of (local and regional) governments (Nederhand *et al.* 2016; de Haan *et al.* 2018a). However, a weakened or troubled relationship with the government can also contribute to initiatives not succeeding and is perceived by initiators as an important failure factor (de Haan *et al.* 2018a). In the context of the shift towards the Big Society, citizens' initiatives require changes from local and regional governments, i.e., letting go of responsibilities and transferring this responsibility to citizens (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Pestoff 2012; Van Meerkerk *et al.* 2013; Bosworth *et al.* 2016; Bjärstig and Sandström 2017).

However, existing institutional structures remain as they are despite the procedural changes required to support citizens' initiatives and to enable them to take over responsibilities. Meijer (2016) refers to this as an institutional misfit because these required changes in role patterns for both governments and citizens often have not yet been put into practice.

Following from the relationship with the government, **existing and changing policies** also emerge separately in the literature as an obstacle. Existing policies can contradict the interests and plans of citizens' initiatives and become an obstacle to the realisation of those plans (Curry 2012; Bosworth *et al.* 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016), e.g., zoning plans or policies on sustainable energy. Elections can contribute to a shift in political power and to new political priorities, and as a result, new policy choices can contradict citizens' initiatives (Edelenbos *et al.* 2017; Salemink and Strijker *et al.* 2018). Several authors argue that citizens' initiatives should align with existing policy to increase their chances of success, as this alignment is likely to be followed by support of the government (see, for example, Bisschops and Beunen 2018; Li *et al.* 2016; Nederhand *et al.* 2016). Van Dam *et al.* (2015) argue that government policies can have a performative effect on citizens' initiatives. The performative effect entails a tendency for citizens' initiatives to be shaped by or follow the expectations and actions of governmental organizations. Furthermore, policies prescribe the pace at which governments can operate (e.g., when applications for subsidies can be handed in), which results in an inability to follow the pace of citizens' initiatives, and thus the inflexibility of governments can frustrate the process of citizens' initiatives (Boonstra and Boelens 2011; Salemink and Strijker 2016). Both this aspect, as well as the aspect of the relationship with the government, mainly play a role after the group of initiators has formed (stage 4 and 5).

The above-mentioned obstacles and risks to citizens' initiatives which became differently effective in different development stages of the process, are derived from studies on ongoing citizens' initiatives. It is yet unclear how these aspects operate on different types of initiatives in rural areas. There is little work focusing on the processes by which citizens' initiatives fail in different contexts and the consequences of such failures, even though a focus on failed citizens' initiatives would contribute to developing further insights into these types of initiatives and the prevention of failure (Meijer 2017). This knowledge gap may be explained by the fact that initiators of failed initiatives are more difficult to reach because of the potential stigmatisation associated with stopped or failed citizens' initiatives (Meijer 2017). This article aims to fill the gap around failed citizens' initiatives and to shed light on the processes involved with the stoppage and failure of citizens' initiatives from the perspective of the initiatives themselves.

Three case studies of citizens' initiatives

Research area and case selection

The analysis presented in the current study is based on qualitative data from three citizens' initiatives that perceived their own performance as failed. These initiatives are situated in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands, Drenthe, Friesland

and Groningen and take place in rural areas that are experiencing or are expected to experience depopulation. Thus, the need for citizens' initiatives to contribute to public service delivery can be more urgent there (Woods 2006; Skerratt 2010; Copus *et al.* 2011; Steiner and Atterton 2014; Salemink 2016). We focus specifically on those rural areas which are defined according to Dutch standards as having 1,000 addresses or fewer per square kilometre (CBS, n.d.). Some of the included areas can be considered less popular areas to live, and they attract lower levels of migration compared to more popular rural areas. Motivations to move to or stay in these areas include living close to family and friends, favourable housing prices and the physical quality of the environment (Bijker 2013).

The selection of the initiatives was based on an earlier inventory of citizens' initiatives (de Haan *et al.* 2018a). This inventory consisted of initiatives in the Northern Netherlands, both active as well as stopped initiatives, based on information of informants from the field, government databases and web-based information (de Haan *et al.* 2018a). To be selected for the study, the initiatives had to meet the criterion of no longer being active or of struggling, i.e., having failed according to their own perspective. Following from news-items on initiatives or information of the participants, four initiatives from this inventory were identified as struggling or having stopped prematurely, while at the time of the inventory they were still active. Three of these initiatives were approached for participation in the research to allow for an even distribution within the three provinces, as different (policy) contexts could play a role in the failure of the initiatives. Considering these initiatives as failed does not mean that the initiators had stopped trying to reach their goals or that others perceived the initiative as failed. As much as possible, external professionals involved with the initiatives, such as government officials, were also approached about participation in the case studies. However, not all of them were willing to participate, generally because they had insufficient time to participate or because they had changed jobs in the meantime. The presented findings are thus mainly based on the perspectives of the initiators, but when possible multiple perspectives were included. For all cases, the point of information saturation was reached.

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

Data collection and analysis

Besides the geographical distribution (3.1), we also selected our three cases because of their variety in characteristics (in terms of location, goals, group composition, and relationship with government). Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with participants of the citizens' initiatives and with the involved professionals during the period from February to September 2017 (see Table 1 for the number of interviews per case). Using a semi-structured interview protocol, open questions were asked about the way the initiative evolved, which actions took place by whom and how and why the

initiators perceived the initiative as a failure. External professionals involved with the initiative were able to illustrate these processes from an institutional perspective during the in-depth interviews. Nevertheless, the perceived failure was experienced by the initiators, not necessarily by the professionals.

Each interview covered the status of the initiative at the time of the interview and the initiator's view on the description of the different development stages of the process. Also, the reasons for failure and whether the failure could have been prevented were discussed. The interviews took one to two hours. Additionally, the websites of the cases and additional documents and additional information provided by the initiators or external professionals, such as presentations, minutes of meetings and newspaper articles, were used for the analysis.

Using the qualitative data analysis software package Atlas.ti, fragments of the interviews were coded regarding the following topics: actions and achievements of the initiative, perceived causes of failure, reflections of other participants on the process and their role, and the role and perceived responsibilities of governments and (semi-) governmental organisations. The most prominent categories which have emerged during the coding process were related to the process of the initiative, the consequences of stopping, the motivation of the participants for contributing to the initiative, the effects of the initiative within the village or the community and the skills of the members of the initiative.

Before the interviews started, the participants were informed about how the information they provided would be used and, upon agreement, the participants signed to indicate their consent. To ensure as much disclosure as possible on potentially sensitive topics, the participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity in the proceedings. Therefore, in the description of the cases and the results, markers of identity are removed, and pseudonyms are used to refer to the individual participants. The following results section will first describe the processes of the initiatives which lead to the perceived failure and second, analyse which factors play a role within these failure processes.

Results

Case descriptions and development phases

The first case is a citizens' initiative that aimed to combine several facilities and services into one area in a village. The process started with one of the sports clubs (the soccer club) being in need of new changing rooms (stage 1). Given the context of

Table 1: *Number of interviews per case*

	Initiators	Professionals
Multifunctional accommodation initiative	4	3
Housing cooperative initiative	3	1
Energy cooperative initiative	4	0

depopulation in the region and the village, a group of residents made plans to combine several services and facilities within the village (stage 2 and 3), because a number of services and facilities which were situated in the village required renovation. The initiators suggest that it would be most effective and convenient if all of these were located in the same central location. The idea behind this combination of facilities was to reduce overall costs and thus maintain these services by sharing the building and related costs, and above all, to keep them affordable when member numbers start to decrease.

The initiators were very ambitious in their plans and aimed to combine many services and facilities. The services and facilities were mostly connected to the sports associations in the village that needed to renovate their current accommodations, namely the soccer facilities, the swimming pool and the court tennis club. Additionally, the existing multifunctional accommodation was in need of a renovation and was included in the plans for the new building. The new building and surrounding fields would also accommodate the tennis club and snooker club and serve as a central canteen for all the associations (stage 4). Additionally, cultural associations, such as music associations, were to be accommodated within the building. Lastly, the building would serve as a central meeting point for the village, and halls could be rented for computer courses for the elderly or for youth gatherings, for example. In the following, this case will be referred to as the *multifunctional accommodation initiative*.

The multifunctional accommodation initiative started to gather funding after the group and its ideas had taken shape (stage 4). Initially the local government was approached for funding. The local government was positive about the plans but informed the initiators at an early stage that it would not be possible to provide financial support. The group of initiators therefore approached the regional government, which was also positive about the plans. Nevertheless, because financial support for the initiative would include regional financial means, the regional government requested that a regional vision and approach be included within the plans. The initiators aimed for meeting these additional requirements. One element of the requirement for the regional vision was the commitment of the surrounding villages. However, (financial) support for the services and facilities in the village where the initiative was situated would probably mean the end of financial support and eventually the end of the services and facilities in the other villages (which is a result of depopulation and a lack of government funds to support all services). Despite already having gathered support of the village (stage 2), now the initiators were sent back to this stage for a broader support. Subsequently, a discussion began among inhabitants of the initiative's village and the surrounding villages regarding which services and facilities had to remain at which location and which villages would (in the longer term) lose certain services and facilities. Ultimately, the villages were not able to reach an agreement on the division of services and facilities and therefore, the initiative did not secure a regional commitment from the surrounding villages. This lack of commitment resulted in the failure of the initiative because the regional government rejected providing the necessary financial support. During the data collection process, this was the status quo: developed plans but a lack of financial and political support.

The second case involves the prevention of the demolition of social houses and the establishment of a housing cooperative. A social housing corporation communicated

that 22 houses within a village were scheduled for demolition because of expected population decline and the poor condition of the houses. This announcement led to a protest by inhabitants of the village, especially on the street where the demolition was planned because the inhabitants were very dissatisfied with this decision (stage 1). A town meeting was organised, during which the citizens' initiative was created. The citizens' initiative wanted to provide an alternative to safeguard affordable social housing for their village and to prevent open spaces from developing on their street (stage 2 and 3). This initiative will be referred to as the *housing cooperative initiative*.

With the start of the housing cooperative initiative, negotiations began among the initiators, the housing corporation at the forefront and, further in the background, the local government. The interests of the different stakeholders were in opposition, with the initiative wanting to safeguard the houses and the corporation and local government wanting to demolish them because of their poor condition and the predicted decline in future residents, given the context of depopulation. The initiators developed several plans to prevent demolition, which went back and forth between the initiators and the corporation (stage 4). One of the options was a housing cooperative. At first, the corporation and the local government did not support this plan because they did not want to place (more) houses of poor quality on the rental market and burden the cooperative with the costs of renovation. Furthermore, the existing housing quotas ('contingenten' in Dutch) prescribe demolition of deteriorated houses within areas that expect population decline. Nevertheless, the corporation later did see the possibilities of launching a social housing cooperative with a cooperative plan and became legally obligated to financially facilitate the start of that plan (because of new legislation: Woningwet 2018). Therefore, the housing corporation wanted to provide the opportunity for a pilot but set one condition for this pilot: it would only include the safeguarding of six houses instead of all 22 houses scheduled for demolition. These six houses were in the best condition compared to the others and thus required smaller investments in renovation.

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

The housing cooperative initiative stalled during the process of building the co-operative plan (stage 4). The initiators did not trust the housing co-operative to be viable when it would only include six houses; they saw potential risks in the event of a default. However, the housing corporation and the local government were bound by the housing quotas, which did not allow safeguarding more houses for the cooperative. Furthermore, the high level of distrust between the initiators and the housing corporation had increased, damaging the relationships and negotiations. At the time of the data collection, the initiators were considering what the best possible outcome could be for their neighbourhood and village.

The third case is a citizens' initiative focusing on sustainable energy and liveability, including several villages in one of the above-mentioned provinces. A group of

inhabitants of these villages wanted to create revenue that could be invested in improving the liveability of their villages, by starting an energy co-operative (stage 1). The energy cooperative was meant to generate sustainable energy with solar panel fields, for example, for its members within the region (stage 2). This initiative will be referred to as the *energy cooperative initiative*.

The energy cooperative initiative started during a village meeting among citizens. A group of initiators was formed, and they involved people from other villages as well. Several ideas for sustainable energy were formulated in working groups, and one of the working groups focused on high-speed internet and split off from the initiative to work on that idea. With this split, many active members of the initiative continued by only contributing to the high-speed internet branch of the initiative because of the investment of time it required and because this branch of the initiative had already produced concrete results. The working groups on sustainable energy continued but struggled to attract the required funding, and at first their ideas existed only on article (stage 2 and 3).

As a result, it was difficult to attract members who wanted the energy cooperative to be their energy supplier, and to attract members for the initiative in itself. A vicious cycle developed in which people left the initiative instead of producing concrete ideas and results (stage 3 and 4). Additionally, plans for wind turbines in one of the participating villages led to some inhabitants no longer wanting to contribute to a sustainable society in general or to the energy cooperative in particular. The decision about the placement of wind turbines led to so much conflict within the region that cooperation on sustainable energy was no longer possible among the residents. Therefore, the funds that had been secured in the meantime were returned. At the time of data collection, the initiative still existed, but in a hibernating state, awaiting potential new plans in the future because it was no longer active at that point (stage 4).

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

The cause for the initiatives stalling at stage four appears to originate from other development phases. For the multifunctional accommodation and housing co-operative initiatives, the struggle seems to relate to phase 2 (community support). Even though the plans are supported by the community, community support seems not to be the only required form of support. Political or institutional support are also necessary for these cases. Despite being able to continue towards the following development stages, the insufficient support at stage 2 lead to getting stuck at stage 4. Besides the struggle to form the group in stage 3, the energy cooperative initiative also suffered from a lack of support (stage 2). Despite having gathered community support earlier on, the rise of conflict within the area caused a decrease in the support for the plans of the initiative. As such, progressing through the stages of development

is not necessarily a linear process, but moving back and forth in response to changes in context is also possible.

Processes of perceived failure of the three cases

The interview data reveal the commonalities with the six obstacles identified from the literature. Also, new obstacles were identified, such as senses of ownership. The theoretical, as well as the empirical obstacles, are grouped into three themes which reflect and elucidate how the obstacles interrelate and interact. The first theme, interactions with governments and (semi-) governmental organizations, refers to differences in pace between governmental bodies and the initiatives; these differences stem from differences in attitude, the timing of decision-making and the pace that is preferred. Within the theme of interactions with governments and (semi-) governmental organisations, the obstacles *relationship with government, existing and changing policy* and *insufficient financial means* are included. The second theme is senses of both ownership and responsibility. *The scale* and *non-representation of a community of citizens* are aspects from theory are included within the senses of ownership and responsibility theme because the cases aim to take ownership of local public space and do so with community support. The third theme is the personal investment initiators make regarding their own status and reputation. *Volunteer burnout* is also part of the third theme. The three themes will be discussed in more detail in the following.

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

Lisa – initiator – housing co-operative initiative

[...] and then you start to think, you want to do things, but you want to organise things at your own pace. That should be possible, but when it is not, you just have to go on. [...] The pressure was high,

the pressure of the housing corporation was high. [...] And that has been the biggest struggle for this initiative. Because of the pressure of the housing corporation, it never felt right, and that influences the entire initiative. You can't decide your own tempo for your plans'.

This mismatch also surfaced in the multifunctional accommodation initiatives and was not only experienced from the perspective of the initiative. Michelle, a local government official, illustrates how the municipality learned from the experience where the pace of the initiative was not followed by the government.

Michelle – local government official – multifunctional accommodation case

'The pressure. Time pressure. What we have learned from that is that stakeholders should know beforehand what the frameworks are. What can be expected in terms of financial means, support, timeframe of decision-making of governments. If you want this, it should not be under pressure. Because, well, these things take time'.

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

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

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

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

decided where to place the wind turbines and thus created conflict and resistance within the community, the funds were returned.

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

Robert – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

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

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

Quentin – local government official – multifunctional accommodation case

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

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

(Salemink and Strijker 2018). Ownership of risks and of the initiative itself forms part of the second theme, as discussed in the next section.

Senses of ownership and responsibility. Our analysis illustrates how initiators struggle at times to take ownership and responsibility of their initiative, as it is unclear who should take this ownership and responsibility: the initiators or the local government. As stated in the previous section, the initiators and inhabitants of the involved villages bear the consequences of not succeeding, while at the same time, it seems that the process of the initiative is a shared responsibility among initiators and government. The following quote from Steven illustrates the interdependence between initiatives and local or regional government (an interdependence also found by Salemink and Strijker (2016)) and thus, how it is complicated for the initiators to develop ownership of the initiative.

Steven – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

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

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

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

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

Lisa – initiator – housing cooperative initiative

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

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

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

Leo – initiator – energy cooperative initiative

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

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

The way initiators develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for place, relates to whom the citizens' initiatives represent. When the group of citizens who takes control over a place represents the interests of the community, the citizens' initiatives can be perceived as more legitimate. Not being representative of the interests of the community, and thus not having legitimacy, was identified within the literature as a potential obstacle to citizens' initiatives (Edelenbos *et al.* 2016; Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018). We observed that representation in these cases is less about having a representative group composition (i.e. a balanced representation of all community groups within the initiative) than it is about support for the initiative's goal and the goal being supported by the community (i.e., without groups opposing the goal). For example, the housing co-operative initiative merely comprised initiators whose houses were not on the list for demolition, thus not representing all groups within the community equally. However, representation revolves around the interests of the people living on the street and in the villages. The initiators represent their interest, and this interest is broadly supported within the community. Nevertheless, in this case, representation was not found to be of great importance in the process of perceived failure. This finding can be explained by the development phase that the cases had reached. It seems that the initiatives had progressed to such an extent that the matter of representing the community, as a means of gaining legitimacy, had already taken place. Therefore, the initiatives could continue with their activities but still became stalled on different issues.

The motivation of the initiators to deploy the initiative, and thus appropriate both place and the initiative, seemed to be inexhaustible in all the cases. Only when they felt there were no options left, and after many setbacks, did their motivation to continue decline. This is not surprising when we consider that the initiators began their

actions on behalf of their own places. Jennifer exemplifies why she was – and still is – motivated to join the housing co-operative initiative.

Jennifer – initiator – housing co-operative initiative

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

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

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

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

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

The investment of skills, knowledge and time can put a strain on initiators, ultimately leading to volunteer burnout. In the literature, volunteer burnout was described as a factor that can lead to the failure of citizens' initiatives (Allen and Mueller 2013;

Salemink and Strijker 2016). Remarkably, we found that, indeed, much was asked of the initiators in terms of skills, knowledge and time, but no signs of volunteer burnout were present. The opposite seemed to be true: even though the initiators made large personal investments into the initiative, their motivation did not decrease, as illustrated previously.

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

Jake – initiative leader – multifunctional accommodation initiative

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

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

Conclusion

The current study aimed to answer the following research question: *How can the processes of failure of citizens' initiatives be described and explained?* In this article, the processes that take place in citizens' initiatives that lead to their perceived failure have been explored using a case-study approach. The viewpoints of initiators and government officials regarding the process of failure were included in the analysis. Following the literature review, six obstacles were identified that may contribute to the failure of citizens' initiatives: not representing the community, volunteer burnout, scale, insufficient financial means, the relationship with government, and existing policy. From the perspective of the interviewees, three themes were accountable for failure: difficult or complicated interactions with governments and (semi-) governmental organisations, being unable to appropriate the initiative and a high level of personal investment.

The 'interactions with governments and (semi-) governmental organisations' theme indicated how transferring responsibilities can lead to mismatches in several areas and thus contribute to perceived failure. The interactions between citizens'

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

The interview data illustrate that initiators want to appropriate collectively owned places and taking responsibility for an initiative was highlighted. Despite governments also being responsible to a certain extent, governments and initiators do not experience the initiative goals as a shared responsibility. Responsibilities overlap even though interests can be opposed to each other. This combination of overlap and opposition can result in the initiators not being able to appropriate the initiative and ultimately contributes to the perceived failure of the initiative. Barriers within the process of feeling ownership and responsibility for the initiative were identified as well, including the randomness and the non-transparency of the government.

The last theme, 'personal investment', illustrated the effort initiators put into their initiatives and how this relates to the process of failure. The initiators' identification with their place of residence is strong, and initiators are willing to make large investments in the initiative via their involvement and perseverance. One of the aspects identified in the literature, volunteer burnout, seemed not to be an obstacle in our cases. The initiators invest much of their time, knowledge, networks and skills, but they do not seem to be overburdened. The obstacle that we do note is potential damage to the reputation of the initiators when things go wrong. The notion of social damage is a new addition to the body of literature and can be related to the smaller scale and rural setting in which the initiatives operate, given the relatively close ties and higher levels of social control that exist in such settings. At the same time, the close ties could function as a safety net that prevents volunteer burnout, potentially explaining the lack of volunteer burnout in our cases. Nevertheless, the personal investment of initiators deserves recognition. After an initiative fails, the same initiators can decide to entirely quit their efforts for the community as well as for other initiatives (Salemink 2016). Citizens' initiatives can play a vital role in renewed service provision in depopulating rural areas, but their social role should be kept in mind at the same time, and opportunities to develop the initiative in the way the initiators intend should be provided.

Analysing the process of perceived failure of citizens' initiatives has also contributed to understanding the concept of failure. Helmig *et al.* (2014) questioned using organisations seizing to exist as an indicator for failure. This study has confirmed their approach, but for a different reason: citizens' initiatives can be perceived as failed, while the initiative is still existing. As such, the existence of the initiative is not a clear indicator of failure. The work of McConnell (2010), has provided better leads for understanding failure of citizens' initiatives, where failure and success are on a continuum. This study has also shown that initiatives need to have failed on several aspects, prior to being perceived as failed. For instance, the combination of not progressing in the development stages, being unable to attract political support and financial means, have led to perceiving our cases as failed.

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

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

*Corresponding author.

References

- Allen, J.A. and S.L. Mueller (2013) The revolving door: a closer look at major factors in volunteers' intention to quit. *Journal of Community Psychology* 41 (2) pp. 139–155. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop>
- Beer, A. (2014) Leadership and the governance of rural communities. *Journal of Rural Studies* 34 pp. 254–262. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2014.01.007>
- Bijker, R.A. (2013) Migration to less popular rural areas. The characteristics, motivations and search process of migrants. p. 201. (University of Groningen)
- Bisschops, S. and R. Beunen (2018) A new role for citizens' initiatives: the difficulties in co-creating institutional change in urban planning. *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* pp. 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09640568.2018.1436532>
- Björstig, T. and C. Sandström (2017) Public-private partnerships in a Swedish rural context: a policy tool for the authorities to achieve sustainable rural development? *Journal of Rural Studies* 49 pp. 58–68
- Bock, B.B. (2016) Rural marginalisation and the role of social innovation: a turn towards nexogenous development and rural reconnection. *Sociologia Ruralis* 56 (4) pp. 552–573. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12119>

- Boonstra, B. and L. Boelens (2011) Self-organization in urban development: towards a new perspective on spatial planning. *Urban Research & Practice* 4 (2) pp. 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2011.579767>
- Bosworth, G., I. Annibal, T. Carroll *et al.* (2015) Empowering local action through neo-endogenous development; the case of LEADER in England. *Sociologia Ruralis* 56 (3) pp. 427–449. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12089>
- Bosworth, G., F. Rizzo, D. Marquardt *et al.* (2016) Identifying social innovations in European local rural development initiatives. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 29 (4) pp. 442–461. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2016.1176555>
- Bovaird, T. and E. Loeffler (2012) From engagement to co-production: the contribution of users and communities to outcomes and public value. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 23 (4) pp. 1119–1138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12660-012-9309-6>
- Brandsen, T. and J.-K. Helderma (2012) The trade-off between capital and community: the conditions for successful co-production in housing. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 23 (4) pp. 1139–1155. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12660-012-9309-6>
- Brannan, T., P. John and G. Stoker (2006) Active citizenship and effective public services and programmes: how can we know what really works? *Urban Studies* 43 (5–6) pp. 993–1008. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980600676626>
- Bultsma, E., N. van der Veen and J. Hitzert (2015) Minsken meitsje de mienskip. Succes- en faalfactoren van burgerinitiatieven in Fryslân. Available at: https://www.partoer.nl/sites/default/files/portfolio_attachments/minsken_meitsje_de_mienskip.pdf
- Calderwood, E. and K. Davies (2013) Localism and the community shop. *Local Economy* 28 (3) pp. 339–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094212474870>
- CBS (no date) Stedelijkheid (van een gebied), CBS. Available at: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/onzediensten/methoden/begrippen?tab=s#xml:id=stedelijkheid-van-een-gebied>
- Cheshire, L. and Woods, M. (2009) Citizenship and governmentality, rural. Pp. 113–118 in R. Kitchin and N. Thrift (eds) *International encyclopedia of human geography* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Ltd)
- Copus, A.K., M. Shucksmith, T. Dax *et al.* (2011) EDORA: European development opportunities for rural areas, applied research 2013/1/2: final report (Luxembourg: ESPON & UHI Millennium Institute)
- Curry, N. (2012) Community participation in spatial planning: exploring relationships between professional and lay stakeholders. *Local Government Studies* 38 (3) pp. 345–366. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2011.642948>
- van Dam, R., M. Duineveld and R. During (2015) Delineating active citizenship: the subjectification of citizens' initiatives. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 17 (2) pp. 163–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2014.918502>
- Drent, M. (2017) Ouderlijke' pendelbus brengt leerlingen Woldendorp en Termunterzijl straks naar school, RTV Noord. Available at <https://www.rtvnoord.nl/nieuws/177080/Ouderlijke-pendelbus-brengt-leerlingen-Woldendorp-en-Termunterzijl-straks-naar-school>
- Edelenbos, J., I. Van Meerkerk and T. Schenk (2016) The evolution of community self-organization in interaction with government institutions: cross-case insights from three countries. *American Review of Public Administration* pp. 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074016651142>
- Edelenbos, J., I. van Meerkerk and J. Koppenjan (2017) The challenge of innovating politics in community self-organization: the case of Broekpolder. *Public Management Review* 19 (1) pp. 55–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1200663>
- Espejo, R. and Z.M. Bendek (2011) An argument for active citizenship and organisational transparency. *Kybernetes* 40 (3/4) pp. 477–493. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03684921111133692>
- Fazzi, L. (2011) Social co-operatives and social farming in Italy. *Sociologia Ruralis* 51 (2) pp. 119–136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2010.00526.x>

- Groninger Dorpen (2015) Groninger Dorpendag. Available at <https://www.kennisvoorkrimp.nl/publicaties-over-krimp/groninger-dorpendag>
- de Haan, E., T. Haartsen, S. Meier *et al.* (2018a) Understanding the success of rural citizens' initiatives: perspectives of founders. *Journal of Rural Studies* pp. 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.11.001>
- de Haan, E., S. Meier, T. Haartsen *et al.* (2018b) Defining “success” of local citizens' initiatives in maintaining public services in rural areas: a professional's perspective. *Sociologia Ruralis* 58 (2) pp. 312–330. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12173>
- Haggett, C. and M. Aitken (2015) Grassroots energy innovations: the role of community ownership and investment. *Current Sustainable/Renewable Energy Reports* 2 (3) pp. 98–104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40518-015-0035-8>
- Healey, P. (2011) Civic capacity, progressive localism and the role of planning. *RTPI Nathaniel Lichfield annual lecture*
- Healey, P. (2015) Civil society enterprise and local development. *Planning Theory & Practice* 16 (1) pp. 11–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2014.995212>
- Helmig, B., S. Ingerfurth and A. Pinz (2014) Success and failure of nonprofit organizations: theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and future research. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 25 (6) pp. 1509–1538
- Jones, O. and J. Little (2000) Rural challenge(s): partnership and new rural governance. *Journal of Rural Studies* 16 (2) pp. 171–183. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167\(99\)00058-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0743-0167(99)00058-3)
- Jonker-Verkaart, M. and T. Lupi (2017) Van krimp naar rek (Den Haag: Platform 31)
- Kaehne, A. (2015) Multi-agency protocols as a mechanism to improve partnerships in public services. *Local Government Studies* 41 (3) pp. 321–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2013.861819>
- Kelly, K. and T. Caputo (2006) Case study of grassroots community development: sustainable, flexible and cost-effective responses to local needs. *Community Development Journal* 41 (2) pp. 234–245. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsio52>
- Lambriu, M. and C. Petrescu (2016) Bottom-up social enterprises in Romania. Case study – retirees' mutual aid association. *International Review of Sociology* 6701 (June) pp. 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2016.1181388>
- Li, Y., H. Westlund, X. Zheng *et al.* (2016) Bottom-up initiatives and revival in the face of rural decline: case studies from China and Sweden. *Journal of Rural Studies* 47 (B) pp. 506–513. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.07.004>
- May, J. (2007) The triangle of engagement: an unusual way of looking at the usual suspects. *Public Money and Management* 27 (1) pp. 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9302.2007.00557.x>
- McConnell, A. (2010) Policy success, policy failure and grey areas in-between. *Journal of Public Policy* 30 (3) pp. 345–362. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X10000152>
- Van Meerkerk, I., B. Boonstra and J. Edelenbos (2013) Self-organization in urban regeneration. A two case comparative research. *European Planning Studies* 21 (10) pp. 1630–1652. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2012.722963>
- Meijer, A. (2016) Coproduction as a structural transformation of the public sector. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 29 (6). <https://doi.org/10.1108/0951355111147178>
- Meijer, M. (2017) When it goes wrong ... Learning from challenged (and revived) citizen initiatives in depopulating areas. *Conference Paper at the Nordic Geographers Meeting*
- Meijer, M. (2018) Community-led, government-fed and informal pp. 190. (University of Utrecht)
- Munoz, S.A., A. Steiner and J. Farmer (2015) Processes of community-led social enterprise development: learning from the rural context. *Community Development Journal* 50 (3) pp. 478–493. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsuo55>
- Nederhand, J., V. Bekkers and W. Voorberg (2016) Self-organization and the role of government: how and why does self-organization evolve in the shadow of hierarchy? *Public Management Review* 18 (7) pp. 1063–1084. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2015.1066417>

- Neumeier, S. (2012) Why do social innovations in rural development matter and should they be considered more seriously in rural development research? – Proposal for a stronger focus on social innovations in rural development research. *Sociologia Ruralis* 52 (1) pp. 48–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9523.2011.00553.x>
- O'Shaughnessy, M. and P. O'Hara (2016) Towards an explanation of Irish rural-based social enterprises. *International Review of Sociology* 26 (2) pp. 223–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2016.1181389>
- Pestoff, V. (2012) Co-production and third sector social services in Europe: some concepts and evidence. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 23 (4) pp. 1102–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1102-1118>
- Provincie Groningen (2017) Monitor leefbaarheidssubsidies: investeringen provincie hebben effect (Provincie Groningen). Available at https://www.provinciegroningen.nl/actueel/nieuws/nieuwsbericht/_nieuws/toon/Item/monitor-leefbaarheidssubsidies-investeringen-provincie-hebben-effect/
- Rosol, M. (2012) Community volunteering as neoliberal strategy? Green space production in Berlin. *Antipode* 44 (1) pp. 239–257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00861.x>
- Salemink, K. (2016) Digital margins: how spatially and socially marginalized communities deal with digital exclusion (Groningen: Gildeprint)
- Salemink, K. and D. Strijker (2016) Rural broadband initiatives in the Netherlands as a training ground for neo-endogenous development. *Local Economy* 31 (7) pp. 778–794. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094216670940>
- Salemink, K. and D. Strijker (2018) Digitaal platteland – white paper over digitale ontsluiting van het Nederlandse platteland (Groningen: University of Groningen)
- Shucksmith, M. et al. (2006) First European quality of life survey: urban-rural differences (Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies for European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions)
- Skerratt, S. (2010) Hot spots and not spots: addressing infrastructure and service provision through combined approaches in rural Scotland. *Sustainability* 2 (6) pp. 1719–1741. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su2061719>
- Steiner, A. and J. Atterton (2014) The contribution of rural businesses to community resilience. *Local Economy* 29 (3) pp. 228–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094214528853>
- Taló, C., T. Mannarini and A. Rochira (2014) Sense of community and community participation: a meta-analytic review. *Social Indicators Research* 117 (1) pp. 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-013-0347-2>
- Thiede, B.C., D.L. Brown, S.R. Sanders et al. (2017) A demographic deficit? Local population aging and access to services in rural America, 1990–2010. *Rural Sociology* 82 (1) pp. 44–74. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12117>
- Tonkens, E. and I. Verhoeven (2018) The civic support paradox: fighting unequal participation in deprived neighbourhoods. *Urban Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098018761536>
- van der Veen, E. (2017) Vervallen café begint aan tweede jeugd als huiskamer van Warffum (DVHN) (Groningen: Dagblad van het Noorden (DVHN))
- Verhoeven, I. and E. Tonkens (2011) Bewonersinitiatieven: partnerschap tussen burgers en overheid. *Beleid en Maatschappij* 38 pp. 419–437
- Visser, A., T. Lupi and R. Dorenbos (2016) Ondernemerskracht in krimpregio's (Den Haag: Platform 31)
- Wandersman, A. (2009) Four keys to success (theory, implementation, evaluation, and resource/system support): high hopes and challenges in participation. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 43 (1–2) pp. 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-008-9212-x>
- Wiseman, J. (2006) Local heroes? Learning from recent community strengthening initiatives in Victoria. *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 65 (2) pp. 95–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8500.2006.00485.x>

- Woningwet (2018) Woningwet. Available at: <http://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0005181/2018-01-01>
- Woods, M. (2006) Redefining the “rural question”: the new “politics of the rural” and social policy. *Social Policy & Administration* 40 (6) pp. 579–595
- WRR (2012) *Vertrouwen in burgers* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press)

Erzsi Meerstra-de Haan* 

Postdoc Researcher at the Faculty of Economics and Business
University of Groningen
The Netherlands
e.m.meerstra@rug.nl

Sabine Meier

Professor of Spatial Development and Social Inclusion, Faculty of Education, Architecture
and Arts
University of Siegen
Germany

Elles Bulder

Professor Living Environment in Transition at the Centre of Research and Innovation for
Built Environment
Hanze University of Applied Science
The Netherlands

Tialda Haartsen

Adjunct Professor of Rural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences
University of Groningen
The Netherlands