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## Non-engagement of Mid-aged and Elderly Residents in Rural Civic Livability Initiatives\*

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**ABSTRACT** In the context of public budget cuts and rural areas facing depopulation and aging, local governments increasingly encourage citizen engagement in addressing local livability issues. This paper examines the non-engagement of mid-aged and elderly residents (45+ years old) in civic initiatives that intend to improve the livability of their community. We focus on residents of depopulating rural areas in the North Netherlands. We compare their engagement with the behavior of residents in other, not depopulating, rural areas, and urban areas. Using logistic statistical analyses, we found that the majority of the aging residents did not engage in civic livability initiatives during the past two years, and one-third of this group had no intention to do so in the future. In all areas, the main reasons for non-engagement were that residents had other priorities, felt not capable of engaging, or felt that the responsibility for local livability belonged to the local government. Furthermore, it appeared that non-engagement was predominantly explained by the unwillingness to engage, rather than by specific motivations or lacking abilities.

### Introduction

Like elsewhere in Europe, the more peripheral rural areas of the Netherlands are currently facing depopulation and aging (Cloet 2003; Haartsen and Venhorst 2010; Hoppers and Reverda 2012; Reher 2007). This development goes along with a variety of challenges which put pressure on the livability (“Leefbaarheid” in Dutch) of the communities within these areas, such as the deterioration and vacancy of houses and the closure of schools, shops, public transport facilities, and social and health-care services (Bock 2019; Christiaanse and Haartsen 2017; Hoppers and Reverda 2012; Korsten and Goedvolk 2008). Following

\*The authors gratefully acknowledge the Frisian Institute for Social Research (FSP) for sharing data of their Frisian citizen panel.

Gieling and Haartsen (2017), livability refers to the individual satisfaction with the social and physical living environment and more particularly to the extent to which the environment responds to demands of a collective nature such as the level of facilities and services, the public space, meeting opportunities, and social care. It is a common term in the Netherlands used by policymakers, societal organizations, and citizens. Until recently, the responsibility of addressing such livability issues was at the level of the local government (municipalities). As they are dealing with austerity measures and cuts in public funding, however, they search for alternative ways to ensure local livability. In this context, neoliberalist ideas have gained ground in Dutch policy arenas as reflected in the notion that citizens can provide public goods and meet community needs more effectively and efficiently than (local) governments can. Other European countries have witnessed similar developments (Glenna, Shortall, and Brandl 2014). The encouragement of citizen engagement in addressing local livability issues has led to multiple governance experiments in Dutch municipalities with citizens taking over former government responsibilities in the public domain (van Dam, Duineveld, and During 2015; Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Koppenjan 2017). Citizens are expected to have the knowledge and the capacity to find local solutions, to strengthen social cohesion through new collaborations, and to increase their self-organizing abilities (Gieling and Haartsen 2017; de Haan et al. 2018). Particularly in depopulating rural areas, the rise of such citizen engagement is perceived as a positive development (Bock 2019). Local policy discourses promote residents to obtain more room for initiatives that address local livability issues and to acquire higher levels of responsibilities and decision-making power in doing so. This has resulted in various ad hoc and tailor-made livability initiatives that are led by citizens and supported by local governments. These differ between villages and municipalities. Civic engagement, as defined in this article, entails the initiation of or participation in such livability initiatives through which citizens search to realize, for example, multifunctional community centers including meeting places, health centers, and libraries; the improvement of housing, public playgrounds, cemeteries, green areas, and transport for older adults to health-care centers or shops outside the village (Ubels, Bock, and Haartsen 2019; Ubels, Haartsen, and Bock 2019).

Recently, various scholars have studied different aspects of novel forms of citizen action. For example, Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Koppenjan (2017); Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk (2018) investigated experimental collaborations between citizens and formal authorities from an evolutionary perspective; Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer (2014) looked

into the capacities of older citizens realizing social enterprises providing social and health care, and Connelly (2011) and Healey (2015) reflected on the democratic potential and legitimacy of novel forms of governance with citizens in the lead. Although such novel governance forms are on the rise, studies stress that not all citizens are committed to engaging in community-related initiatives. They point at different reasons, among which differences in power and capacities to act (Shucksmith 2002; Skerratt and Steiner 2013). They also emphasize that citizens can have many good reasons not to engage; they may have other priorities, do not consider engagement in their interest or may not see the need for action at all (Crona and Bodin 2006; Gilchrist 2009; Shortall 2008; Shucksmith 2002; Skerratt and Hall, 2012; Skerratt and Steiner, 2013).

Studies also indicate that social groups may differ in their inclination to engage (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014; Ubels, Bock, and Haartsen 2019). So far, we know little about the reasons why residents of depopulating rural areas do not engage in civic initiatives that aim to improve the livability of their communities. Due to the out-migration of younger people and the aging process in depopulating rural areas (Hospers and Reverda 2012), the readiness to engage among older residents is particularly interesting. After all, the initiation of civic engagement will increasingly depend on this group because they are in the majority and have more time available due to their stage in life (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014; Ruth and Franklin 2014). In this study, we want to obtain more insight into the potential non-engagement of mid-aged and elderly residents (45+ years old) in civic livability initiatives within these areas. We expect that residents in this age group have more possibilities to engage in such community initiatives, because they are less likely to have young children and, hence, have more time for other activities. Their reasons to engage may be similar to those revealed in earlier research among rural citizens (see research referred to above). There are also good reasons to expect that the non-engagement in depopulating rural areas and among this particular group can be explained differently than elsewhere. On the one hand, aging residents may be more motivated to engage than elsewhere because of the deteriorating level of services and facilities they will increasingly depend on in the future. On the other hand, engagement may be less because of age and a higher level of socioeconomic vulnerability and marginalization (Bock 2019).

Based on earlier research (see above), it makes sense to distinguish between specific motivations not to engage and the inability to do so. In this paper, we aim to look into the motives and abilities that explain non-engagement in civic initiatives that specifically intend to contribute to local livability and to clarify the relation between such motives and

abilities. In our approach, we also include the possibility that residents do not wish to engage, without any particular reason. Our central question is: how can we explain the non-engagement of aging residents in local civic initiatives that intend to improve the livability of their communities? In doing so, we focus on depopulating rural areas. In order to understand if perceived urgency plays a role in non-engagement, we also include residents living in neighboring rural and urban areas without population decline. The study design is as follows. Firstly, we explore to what extent residents recently did or did not engage in civic initiatives (see section “The Extent of Recent Non-engagement”). We then focus on those who have not engaged recently and have no intention to do so in the future, in order to understand what explains their attitude (see section “Recent Non-engagement: Comparison of Different Socio-Demographic Groups”). Our analysis is based on data from surveys among a citizen panel of residents of the Dutch province of Fryslân.

This paper is structured as follows. We start with a literature review of earlier studies into civic action and the explanations these provide for non-engagement. We then present this study’s conceptual framework. Section “Methodology” discusses the methodology of data collection and data analysis. Section “Non-engagement in Civic Initiatives Aiming at Maintaining or Improving Local Livability” describes the results of the analyses. The conclusions are presented in section “Discussion and Conclusions.”

### **Non-engagement of Residents in Civic Initiatives in Rural Depopulating Areas**

Recent studies approach the non-engagement of citizens in community development from different angles. Many of these studies emphasize the inequality of capacities within and between communities. This may be related to the scarcity of human capital because of the size or composition of the population and the limited pools of volunteers with sufficient time, skills, knowledge, and interests (Meijer and Sysner 2017; Shucksmith 2002; Skerratt and Clare Hall 2012). Lack of capacities may also be related to low levels of civic empowerment (Shucksmith 2002). Moreover, studies point out that it may be particularly challenging to promote capacity building because of the complicated dynamic of intra-community relations and affiliations (Fischer and McKee 2017; Skerratt and Steiner 2013).

There are also studies that focus on the individual level and seek to explain why some residents are more prone to engage than others. Some of those studies stress the importance of the capacity to engage that residents may or may not have (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014;

Shortall 2008; Shucksmith 2002; Skerratt and Hall 2012). Others refer to differences in aspirations, ideas, and interests about what is needed and how it should be realized, as well as individual residents' confidence in their ability to make a difference through their engagement (Crona and Bodin 2006; Skerratt and Steiner 2013).

This study departs from an individual angle and focusses on the differences between residents and their reasons for non-engagement in civic initiatives that aim to contribute to local livability. In doing so, we distinguish between specific *motivations* that residents may have for not engaging and their *lacking ability* to do so. This approach echoes Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (1985; 1991) in which (individual) behavior is explained by motives that reflect individual interest and abilities. We, however, examine why individuals engage in collective actions for the benefit of the community—with collective interests as a driver for individual and group activities. In doing so, we incorporate in our behavioral model primarily factors that explain (the lack of) community-focused action. Based on recent studies, we expect that the following specific *motivations* can play a role in the non-engagement of residents in local civic initiatives. As civic engagement often results from dissatisfaction with existing situations, such as lacking services (Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk 2018; Howley, Scott, and Redmond 2009), we assume that residents are not likely to take action as long as they are satisfied with the status quo. However, they may also lack the motivation to engage when they consider it the role and responsibility of public authorities to act (Ubels, Haartsen, and Bock 2019). Besides, residents may not engage because they disagree with the project plans or approaches of existing initiatives (Connelly 2011). Also, residents may have other priorities and be occupied by other activities, such as work or volunteering in local associations, including social care (Cleaver 2001; Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014; Shortall 2008).

Furthermore, Walton and Cohen (2007), Walton et al. (2012) and Gieling et al. (2018) found that the sense of social belonging that results from positive and enduring social relationships motivates and enables residents to engage in community-focused activities. Residents who feel socially embedded in their community have more access to information about collective wishes and needs, which supports community engagement (Brennan and Luloff 2007; Crona and Bodin 2006; Walton and Cohen 2007; Walton et al. 2012). As social ties in the community are crucial for the joint realization of services, particularly residents who experience a lower level of social belonging may feel unable or unmotivated to engage (Shortall 2008; Shucksmith 2002; Skerratt and Hall 2012). The community-focused agency is also influenced by how people

feel emotionally connected to their community (Brennan and Luloff 2007; Hidalgo and Hernández 2001; Lewicka 2011). Besides the senses of social belonging other factors may be of influence on the level of affection that residents experience toward their community, such as the level of services, travel time to work or the built or natural environment (Brennan and Luloff 2007; Hidalgo and Hernández 2001; Lewicka 2011). In this study, hence, we take into account that both the feelings of social and affective belonging to the community, separately and in interrelation, may contribute to the motivation not to engage or the lacking ability to do so.

There are also other reasons why residents may lack the *ability to engage*. On the one hand, lacking personal resources might withhold them from engaging, for example, high age, low education, poor health, or shortage of skills (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014; Shortall 2008; Skerratt and Steiner 2013). Residents may also decide not to engage because they consider other residents within their communities more influential than themselves (Crona and Bodin 2006; Skerratt and Steiner 2013).

### **Conceptual Framework**

To guide our research, we present a framework that seeks to explain non-engagement at the individual level. We distinguish between factors that contribute to the lacking motivation to engage and the lacking ability to do so. Based on earlier research, we expect sociodemographic characteristics to influence both motivation and ability (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014; Ruth and Franklin 2014).

As we expect that living in rural areas with and without depopulation or urban areas may be of impact on the level and reasons of non-engagement, we also take these contextual factors into account. Residence in one of those types of areas, for example, may influence the perceived urgency to maintain or to improve local livability, or the population structure of such areas may affect the ability to do so as well as the confidence to succeed.

In order to explore the *motivation of non-engagement* (see left column of Figure 1), we take into consideration the following explanations. Firstly, we look into whether and how residents' evaluations of the livability of their community are of influence. When there is high satisfaction with the livability, we expect less motivation to engage. Instead, we expect low levels of satisfaction with livability to increase the motivation to engage, because of the perceived need to act. Secondly, we look into the residents' view of the local government's responsibility for maintaining livability. We assume that they are less motivated to engage if they feel that the responsibility to maintain the livability of their community belongs

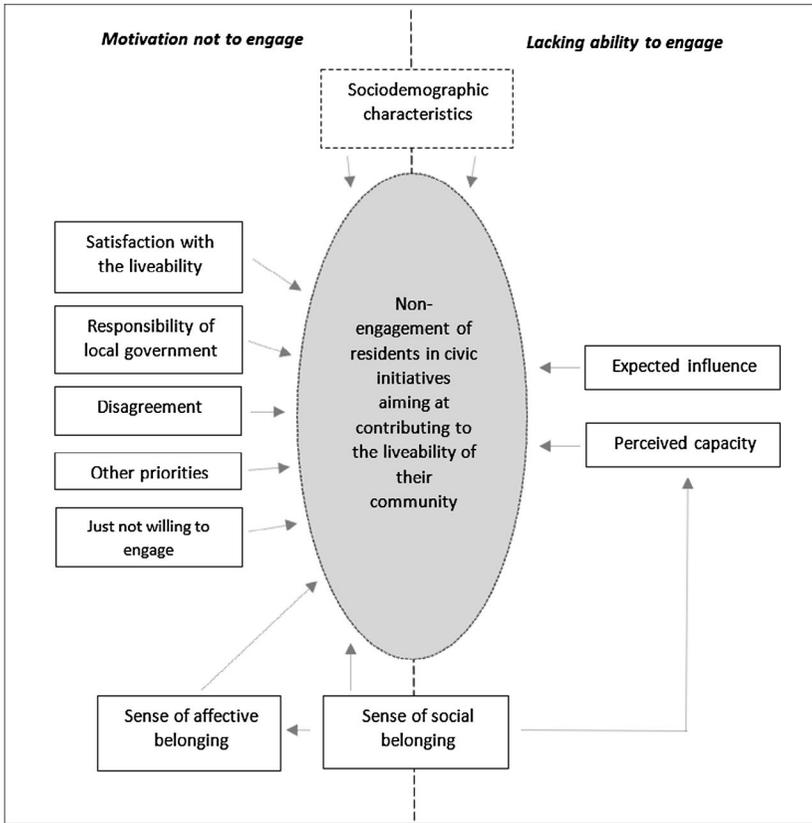


Figure 1. Non-engagement of Residents in Civic Livability Initiatives.

to the local government. Besides, we expect residents to withhold from engaging if they disagree with the project plans or approaches of existing civic initiatives. Also, we explore if there are other activities that they prioritize, such as working, caretaking of children and households, other family members or neighbors, or other forms of volunteering. Although we found no evidence for this in recent literature, we also check if residents may not wish to engage without any particular reason. Next to this, we consider if and how their sense of affective belonging to their living environment impacts their motivation to engage. When such feelings run low or turn toward detachment or resentment, we expect less motivation to engage; instead, when these are positive, we expect a higher level of engagement.

In the same way, we look into residents' sense of social belonging in their community; this regards, in particular, the feelings of connectedness to their neighbors as the basis for their agency. This can be considered as a matter of motivation: not willing to commit to neighbors or villagers to whom they feel not connected. It may be as well a matter of ability: because of the lack of connections, they do not feel accepted and in power to engage.

In order to explore to what extent and how there is *lacking ability to engage* (see right column of Figure 1), we look into the following factors and relations. Firstly, we determine if and how residents' expected influence on local civic initiatives kept them from engaging. Secondly, we consider to what extent a lack of confidence in their capacity plays a role in non-engagement and how this is related to specific personal characteristics, such as age or health.

## Methodology

### Case Selection

The province of Fryslân, with its 194 inhabitants per square kilometer against an average of 502 on the national level, is considered among the most rural areas within the Netherlands (Haartsen, Huigen, and Peter Groote 2003; de Vries et al. 2016). It is one of the twelve provinces of the country that, with 647,268 inhabitants, represents 3.7 percent of the Dutch population (CBS Statline 2018; 2019). In Dutch statistics, Fryslân is considered as mainly rural, and only three of its 27 municipalities are qualified as urban: half of its 419 dwelling places count with less than 500 inhabitants and only 19 with over 5,000 (Provincie Fryslân 2018; de Vries et al. 2016). Most of its rural villages are currently facing population decline, which will probably continue for the coming decades (Province of Fryslân 2018). Although according to OECD definitions Fryslân would be qualified as an intermediate rural area, we selected this province as our case because of its rurality in reigning Dutch perceptions (Steenbekkers et al. 2008), the livability challenges of its smaller villages (see section "Introduction") and the regional policy in which citizen engagement in contributing to livability issues is encouraged (Provincie Fryslân 2018).

### Data Collection

We used a quantitative approach in order to explore the extent of recent non-engagement of Frisian residents in civic initiatives that aim at improving the livability of their community, and the stated lacking intention to do so in the future. As livability is a commonly understood

and established concept in Dutch language and civic engagement in livability initiatives is a well-known phenomenon, we expect that respondents understand what livability initiatives are and what we define as engagement or non-engagement in livability initiatives. To ascertain this, though, we included concrete examples in the survey questions and statements. We operationalized “livability issues” in the survey as issues that regard the public space, for example, maintenance of buildings, streets and green areas; facilities, for example, shops, general practitioner, school, post office; public meeting opportunities, for example, in a community center; and social support, for example, shopping for the elderly or offering transport to a doctor. We operationalized “engagement” in livability initiatives by asking respondents if they engaged the last 24 months in any initiative aiming at improving the livability of their community. We explained this by giving the following examples of engagement: construction or maintenance of a playground, village hall or green areas in the neighborhood, and organizing help for the elderly (see also the list of indicators, survey questions, and statements in Table 1). Here it needs to be underlined that the specific measurement of non-engagement in livability initiatives gives no explanation for non-engagement in any other voluntary activities within communities. Our data were collected via several online surveys by the Frisian Institute for Social Research (FSP) among their Frisian citizen panel. This allowed us to look into non-engagement in general, but also among specific social groups and at the level of different types of areas (see section “Data Analysis”). According to Visser and Fernee (2017), the Frisian citizen panel consists of a group of Frisian residents of 18 years and older who share their experiences and opinions on topical issues. Inviting 40,000 residents from all Frisian municipalities resulted in the participation of around 3,750 respondents (on the base of random sampling). As explained in section “Introduction,” we look into the particular group of mid-aged and elderly residents. To explore why residents within this age range do not engage, we used data of three FSP surveys that were carried out in the spring of 2017 (response of 2,248 residents), spring 2018 (response 1,790), and autumn 2018 (response 1,755). We were able to combine data from the three surveys because of the unique identification (ID) of the respondents. This resulted in 1,274 respondents; for this study, we used the data of the 1,185 respondents who were 45 years or older.

All respondents reacted to the statements (see Table 1) regardless if they had recently engaged in initiatives or not. Besides, only those who did not engage could indicate their reasons for their non-engagement. They could choose among given reasons as well as elaborate on

**Table 1. List of Indicators and Related Survey Questions.**

Indicators	Survey of Autumn 2018
Recent engagement in initiatives of improving the livability of the community	Did you engage the last 24 months in any initiative aiming at improving the livability of your community? (For example, construction or maintenance of a playground/village hall/green maintenance in the neighborhood, organizing help for the elderly)
Future intention to engage in such an initiative	Are you prepared to engage in such an initiative in the future?
Other priorities just not willing to engage	I have no time
Expected influence	I am not feeling to engage
Perceived capacity	My opinion is not taken seriously It is always the same people who determine the course of events anyway My age (too young or too old) My health/physical limitations I don't know how to do it
Satisfaction with the livability	I am satisfied with the livability in my community  My community has no problems in the public space that need improvement (for example poor maintenance of buildings, streets and green areas) <sup>a</sup> I think that there are enough facilities in my community (for example shops, GP, school, post office)

*Main questions*  
Possible answers “Yes/No”

*Reasons for non-engagement*  
If at least one of the main questions was answered with “No,” respondents were asked to indicate their reasons for this. When a reason applied the answer was “Yes”; when this was not the case the answer was “No.” In the survey design we assumed that when respondents did not engage recently and neither had the intention to do so in the future, they would have the same reasons for this. In this way, we avoided asking the reasons twice

*Statements*  
Likert scale, 1–5: 1 = Disagree; 2 = Partially disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree

(Continues)

**Table 1. (Continued).**

Indicators	Survey of Autumn 2018
Sense of affective belonging	I think that there is enough opportunity in my community to meet people (for example, in a community center, at school)
	In my community people support each other enough when needed (for example, shopping for the elderly, offering transport to a doctor)
	I feel at home in my community
Sense of social belonging	I feel involved in my community
	I love my community
	I need contacts with people in my community
	I have quite a lot of contacts with people in my community <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>The original statement of the survey and its values have been reversed, in order to align the initial negative formulation with the positive formulation of the other statements regarding the satisfaction with the livability.

other reasons in an open response category. This provided no new explanations.

### **Data Analysis**

We distinguished two types of rural areas (communities <5,000 inhabitants): the rural areas which are officially identified as areas where depopulation is ongoing or anticipated<sup>1</sup>, indicated here as “Rural depopulation,” and the rural areas without such nomination under the heading of “Rural other.” Larger communities (≥5,000 inhabitants) we labeled as “Urban.”

We set up the data analysis in a step-wise manner. Firstly, we measured the extent of recent non-engagement. Secondly, we compared groups that recently did and did not engage in such initiatives and checked if residence in any of the three types of areas made a difference in the likelihood of civic engagement. We then compared how the respondents explained their non-engagement and checked again if the type of area where they lived mattered. In the next step of our analysis, we focused on the extent to which recent “non-engagers” had no intention to engage in the future. In addition, we conducted logistic regression analyses at the level of each type of area in order to explore why respondents had no intention to engage in the future. Before doing so, we carried out a multicollinearity check through Pearson correlation tests for all recent “non-engagers,” in order to see whether explanatory variables (partially) correlated and, as such, would reduce the reliability of our regression models. We found that this was the case for the variables *Income* and *Duration of residence*.

“Higher-income” correlated both with the dependent variable *Not intending to engage in the future* ( $p < .01$ , 0.189) and with the independent variables *Higher education* ( $p < .01$ , 0.407) and *Employment* ( $p < .01$ , 0.246). As a higher income level often can be explained by a higher education level and employment, we decided to exclude income from further analysis.

In the same way, we found that the “duration of residence” correlated both with the dependent variable *Not intending to engage in the future* ( $p < .01$ , 0.131) and with the independent variables *Age* ( $p < .01$ , 0.278) and *Retirement* ( $p < .01$ , 0.201). As a long time of residence is more likely

<sup>1</sup>Dutch national depopulation policy makes a distinction between rural depopulation (decreasing population prognoses of at least 16 percent until 2040) and anticipation areas (decreasing population prognoses between 4 and 16 percent until 2040) (Ministry of Internal Affairs 2018). We look into these areas in conjunction, because of their resemblance in population dynamics, compared to other areas where the population number is expected to remain stable or to grow.

among mid-aged and elderly respondents, we decided to exclude the variable *Duration of residence* from further analysis as well as the very small group of recent “engagers” who stated that they had no intention to engage again in the future (1 percent of all respondents).

### Sociodemographic Characteristics and Representativeness

Table 2 provides an overview of the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. We compared them with those of all inhabitants of the province of Fryslân, in order to provide some indications for the representativeness of the survey. It appears that male residents, aged 66 and older, with higher education and living as a couple, are overrepresented among our respondents. This is a group that other research has indicated as more frequently engaged in civic initiatives, quite often also in initiator and leadership roles (Tonkens and Verhoeven 2012; 2018). As a result of their overrepresentation, our study might overestimate the overall engagement in community initiatives. At the same time, we see an under-representation of female residents with a midlevel and lower level education and below retirement age. We will take into account how these characteristics may affect the results of the analysis where relevant.

**Table 2. Sociodemographic Characteristics and Representativeness.**

Individual Social Demographic Characteristics, Including Social Activities	% Respondents Survey ( <i>N</i> = 1,185)	% Inhabitants Fryslân <sup>a</sup>
Age		
45–65 years ( <i>N</i> = 559)	47.2	37.7
66 years and older ( <i>N</i> = 626)	52.8	24.4
Gender		
Female	35.9	50.2
Male	64.1	49.8
Education		
Lower education	18.5	29.1
Midlevel education	33.8	41.1
Higher education	47.7	21.9
Household composition <sup>b</sup>		
Living alone	14.8	20.1
Household of 2 persons	66.0	39.0
Household > 2 persons <sup>c</sup>	19.2	40.9
Employment <sup>d</sup>		
Employed	37.8	60.7
Unemployed	12.8	3.5
Retired	49.4	Unknown

<sup>a</sup>Average of the first quarter years of 2017 and 2018.

<sup>b</sup>Approximately, the population of institutional households not included.

<sup>c</sup>We assume that households of two persons concern couples and those with more than two persons are families with children.

<sup>d</sup>From the age of 18.

**Non-engagement in Civic Initiatives Aiming at Maintaining or Improving Local Livability**

**The Extent of Recent Non-engagement**

Table 3 provides an overview of recent non-engagement in the different types of areas. In general, it shows that in total, 73 percent of the respondents did not engage recently in civic livability initiatives in their community, whereas 27 percent of them did. As there was an overrepresentation in our panel of potential engagers (higher educated men), actual recent non-engagement in Fryslân may even be higher.

We expected that the level of engagement would be higher among residents of depopulating areas because of the pressure on local livability and the perceived urgency to act. It appears, instead, that living in a depopulating rural area hardly made a difference in the level of engagement compared to rural areas without depopulation. However, there is a difference between urban and rural areas: with 81 percent the non-engagement was substantially higher in urban than in rural areas (69 percent).

**Recent Non-engagement: Comparison of Different Sociodemographic Groups**

In order to gain further insight into who the recent “non-engagers” are, Table 4 presents the sociodemographic characteristics for each type of area. For comparison purposes, we also included the recent “engagers.”

When comparing the sociodemographic characteristics for recent “non-engagers” and “engagers,” we can conclude that, as we expected, engagement was most prominent among men and higher educated groups. The majority of recent “engagers” in civic livability initiatives also participated more often in other volunteering activities and informal care activities compared to the recent “non-engagers.”

**Table 3. Non-engagement within Different Types of Areas.**

	No	Yes
	%	%
	( <i>n</i> = 884)	( <i>n</i> = 301)
Rural depopulation ( <i>n</i> = 347)	69	31
Rural other ( <i>n</i> = 266)	68	32
Urban ( <i>n</i> = 572)	81	19
Total	73	27

**Table 4. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Non-engaging Respondents of the Last Two Years in the Different Types of Areas.**

Individual Social Demographic Characteristics, Including Social Activities	Recent Non-engagement "Rural Depopulation" %	Recent Non-engagement: "Rural Other" %	Recent Non-engagement: "Urban" %	Recent Engagement %
	(n = 241)	(n = 182)	(n = 461)	(n = 301)
Age				
45–65 years	47.7	51.1	45.3	47.2
66 years and older	52.3	49.9	54.7	52.8
Gender				
Female	40.7	39.0	36.2	29.6
Male	59.3	61.0	63.8	70.4
Education				
Lower education	22.0	18.7	18.2	15.9
Midlevel education	32.8	37.4	35.6	29.9
Higher education	45.2	44.0	46.2	54.2
Household composition				
Living alone	14.1	13.2	17.8	11.6
Household of 2 persons	64.7	69.8	64.6	66.8
Household > 2 persons	21.2	17.0	17.6	21.6
Employment				
Employed	37.8	39.6	37.7	36.9
Unemployed	13.3	15.4	11.7	12.3
Retired	48.5	45.1	50.5	50.8
Volunteering now or last two years	54.8	69.2	54.2	82.1
Informal care now or last year	23.2	24.7	23.0	28.6

We looked more in detail into the types of areas where recent “non-engagers” live. The varying population composition of the three distinct areas may explain some of the above-presented results. Firstly, there were no marked differences between the types of areas, except for a relatively higher prominence of recent non-engagement among respondents with lower education in depopulating rural areas. This may be explained by the higher overall presence of this group in these areas. Secondly, recent “non-engagers” in civic livability initiatives in “other rural areas” did participate more often in other volunteering activities than recent “non-engagers” elsewhere. We have now gained more insight into the frequency of recent non-engagement of different sociodemographic groups in rural areas with and without depopulation and urban areas; in the next step, we want to explore possible explanations for recent non-engagement.

### **Recent Non-engagement: Comparison of Possible Reasons**

Table 5 presents the respondents’ reaction to a variety of possible motivations and abilities that may explain their recent non-engagement in civic livability initiatives, distinguishing between the three types of areas.

Firstly, we compared the possible reasons for non-engagement of all recent “non-engagers” with those of the recent “engagers.” We expected that respondents who were satisfied with the livability of their community would feel less urgency to improve it and, hence, be less motivated to engage in related activities. Instead, we found the opposite to be true: on the whole recent “engagers” were more positive about the livability in their community than recent “non-engagers.” However, the differences between these groups were small. Moreover, most respondents, both recent “engagers” and “non-engagers,” were rather satisfied with the public space, the level of facilities, meeting opportunities, and social support in their community. It is, hence, not just dissatisfaction, which drives engagement in livability initiatives. Maybe, maintaining a satisfying level of livability is an important motivating force too.

Also, we expected that respondents who had a weak sense of social or affective belonging to their community would be less inclined to engage in maintaining or improving its livability. Overall, it appears that, indeed, engagement was more frequent among respondents with a strong sense of social and affective belonging. Nevertheless, also recent “non-engagers” were positive about their community and their social relations within it.

Secondly, we checked if and how the respondents in the three types of areas differed in their reasons not to engage. Table 5 shows that among the most frequently given reasons for non-engagement in all three areas

**Table 5. Motivations and Abilities of “Recent Non-engagers” in the Different Types of Areas.**

Mean Score, %	% Non-engagement “Rural Depopulation” (n = 241)	% Non-engagement “Rural Other” (n = 182)	% Non-engagement “Urban” (n = 461)	% Engagement (n = 301)
<i>Average of Likert scale score (1–5)</i>				
Satisfaction with the livability				
I am satisfied with the livability in my community	3.94	3.97	4.00	4.14
My community has no problems in the public space that need improvement (for example poor maintenance of buildings, streets and green areas)	3.31	3.25	3.38	3.19
I think that there are enough facilities in my community (for example shops, GP, school, post office)	3.44	3.53	3.97	3.63
I think that there is enough opportunity in my community to meet people (for example, in a community center, at school)	3.55	3.75	3.53	3.75
In my community people support each other enough when needed (for example, shopping for the elderly, offering transport to a doctor)	3.61	3.69	3.44	3.87
Sense of affective belonging				
I love my community	3.97	4.13	3.94	4.26
I feel at home in my community	3.45	4.17	4.13	4.32
I feel involved in my community	4.02	3.63	3.46	3.93
Sense of social belonging				
I need contacts with people in my community	3.13	3.19	3.05	3.35
I have quite a lot of contacts with people in my community	3.09	3.42	3.10	3.67

**Table 5. Continued**

Mean Score, %	% Non-engagement "Rural Depopulation" (n = 241)	% Non-engagement "Rural Other" (n = 182)	% Non-engagement "Urban" (n = 461)	% Engagement (n = 301)
<i>% of n</i>				
Other priorities				
I have no time	17.8	26.9	18.4	-
Just not willing to engage				
I am not feeling to engage	8.3	6.0	10.4	-
Disagreement				
I (often) don't agree with existing initiatives in my community	4.1	2.2	1.7	-
Perceived capacity				
My age	27.4	30.2	33.0	-
My health/physical limitations	15.8	18.7	17.1	-
I don't know how to do it	4.1	3.3	5.0	-
Perceived influence				
My opinion is not taken seriously	3.3	0.5	1.3	-
It's always the same people that determine the course of events anyway	10.4	13.2	11.3	-

was a perceived lack of capacity (age, health limitations), other priorities (no time), and the opinion that the government should be responsible rather than themselves. The most notable difference between the areas was that in the other rural areas, recent “non-engagers” more often indicated that they had no time to engage. Above we have already seen that respondents in those areas tended to be involved in multiple volunteering activities, some of which they may have prioritized above engagement in livability initiatives. The next step of our analysis is to discover the reasons if and why the recent “non-engagers” concerned may also be unlikely to engage in the future.

### Recent “Non-engagers” Who Have No Intention to Engage in the Future

Table 6 provides an overview of the extent to which recent “non-engagers” had no intention to engage in civic initiatives in the future (Table 3). In general, it shows that about 37 percent of this group had no intention to engage in the future, whereas a large group of about 63 percent instead did. Given their current non-engagement, this is surprising and may, at least partially, be explained by the social desirability of such a response.

Similar to the level of recent non-engagement (see Table 3), there is little difference between rural areas with or without depopulation for what concerns the respondents’ intention to engage in the future. The difference between rural and urban areas is a bit more apparent: urban recent “non-engagers” more often stated that they had no intention to engage in the future compared to rural recent “non-engagers.” When comparing the outcomes of Table 6 to those of Table 3, it can be concluded that about one-quarter of the rural respondents did not engage

**Table 6. The Extent That Recent “Non-engagers” Neither Had the Intention to Engage in the Future.**

	No Intention to Engage in the Future % <hr/> ( <i>n</i> = 329)	Intention to Engage in the Future % <hr/> ( <i>n</i> = 555)
Rural depopulation ( <i>n</i> = 241)	33	67
Rural other ( <i>n</i> = 182)	34	66
Urban ( <i>n</i> = 461)	41	60
Average	37	63

recently and did not intend to do so in the future. In urban areas, this is the case for almost one-third of the respondents.

**Explanation of the stated not intending to engage in the future by recent “non-engagers”.** In this section, we want to look more in-depth into possible explanations of why recent “non-engagers” may not intend to engage in the future. We used logistic regression analysis for each type of area to understand if the lack of intention to engage is more prominent among specific sociodemographic groups related to specific motivations and abilities or can be explained by contextual factors (see Table 7).

From Table 7, it appears that the primary explanation for not intending to engage in the future is the same for all types of areas: just an overall lacking willingness (*rural depopulation*  $p < .01$ , 0.447; *rural other*  $p < .01$ , 0.431; *urban*  $p < .01$ , 0.316). More, in particular, respondents from rural depopulating areas, seem to lack the motivation to do so when they feel less involved in their community ( $p < .05$ , -0.122). Although there may be more vulnerable and marginalized groups in rural depopulating areas (Bock 2019), other than we expected, our respondents did not explain their non-engagement by a lack of power or expected influence. Neither did they refer to the responsibility of the local government as a reason not to engage, as the “non-engagers” in the other rural and urban areas did (*other rural*  $p < .10$ , 0.243; *urban*  $p < .01$ , 0.193). That this is not the case in rural depopulating areas may be explained by the experience that the local government was not able to fulfill their responsibility as reflected in the decline of services; this may also have instigated a generally higher sense of collective responsibility to solve livability issues through citizen action and more experience with such initiatives.

In the other rural and urban areas, “non-engagers” explained not to be able to engage because of their age (*rural other*  $p < .05$ , 0.248; *urban*  $p < .05$ , 0.141) and health (*urban*  $p < .05$ , 0.177). It is striking is that this is not the case in rural depopulation areas; here, the average age is higher, and health issues are probably more prominent. In rural areas without depopulation, “non-engagers” rarely refer to a lack of time ( $p < .10$ , -0.211) as a reason why they have no intention to engage in the future, despite the higher level of involvement in voluntary activities and social care of respondents in these areas (see Table 2, section “The Extent of Recent Non-engagement”). In urban areas, some specific sociodemographic reasons come to the fore as well: among those who did not intend to engage in the future, were more elderly ( $p < .01$ , 0.015), lower educated (*higher ref. lower education*  $p < .05$ , -0.154) and unemployed respondents (*retirement ref. unemployment*  $p < .05$ , -0.219) and those living in a household with children ( $p < .05$ , 0.143).

**Table 7. Recent “Non-engagers” Who Neither Had the Intention to Engage in the Future. Logistic Regression Analyses with as Dependent Variable “No Intention to Engage in the Future” (No Intention to Engage in the Future = 1, Intention to Engage in the Future = 0).**

Respondents	Rural Depopulation	Rural Other	Urban
	B	B	B
Social demographic characteristics			
Age	0.003	0.003	0.015***
Female (Yes = 1, No = 0)	0.063	0.032	0.000
Education (ref. Lower education)			
Midlevel	-0.059	-0.033	-0.039
Higher	-0.097	-0.109	-0.154**
Household size (ref. Single)			
Two persons	0.034	0.150	0.068
Three or more persons	-0.030	0.117	0.143**
Retirement (ref. Unemployment)			
	-0.062	0.021	-0.219**
Satisfaction with the livability (Likert scale 1–5 <sup>a</sup> )			
I am satisfied with the livability in my community	-0.019	0.109	0.009
In my community, there are no problems in the public space that should be solved (for example poor maintenance of buildings, streets and green areas)	-0.005	-0.010	-0.010
I think that there are enough facilities in my community (for example shops, GP, school, post office)	-0.006	0.048	0.043
I think that there is enough opportunity in my community to meet people (for example, in a community center, at school)	-0.009	-0.013	0.013
In my community people support each other enough when needed (for example, shopping for the elderly, offering transport to a doctor)	-0.041	-0.092	-0.002
Sense of affective belonging (Likert scale 1–5 <sup>a</sup> )			
I love my community	0.013	-0.053	-0.004
I feel at home in my community	0.073	0.024	-0.015
I feel involved in my community	-0.122**	-0.045	-0.059
Sense of social belonging (Likert scale 1–5 <sup>a</sup> )			
I need contacts with people in my community	-0.062	-0.033	-0.054
I hardly have any contacts with people in my community	-0.013	-0.044	-0.024
Responsibility of government (Yes = 1, No = 0)			
I think this task belongs to the municipality	0.131	0.243*	0.193***
Other priorities (Yes = 1, No indication = 0)			
I have no time	-0.095	-0.211**	0.101
Employment (ref. Unemployment)	0.010	0.191	-0.070
Volunteering	-0.075	0.098	-0.032
Informal care	-0.070	0.038	-0.060

(Continues)

**Table 7. (Continued).**

Respondents	Rural Depopulation	Rural Other	Urban
	B	B	B
Just not willing to engage (Yes = 1, No = 0)			
I am not feeling to engage	0.447***	0.431***	0.316***
Perceived capacity (Yes = 1, No = 0)			
My age	0.089	0.248**	0.141**
My health/physical limitations	-0.029	0.107	0.177***
I don't know how to do it	-0.087	-0.263	-0.005
Expected influence (Yes = 1, No = 0)			
My opinion is not taken seriously	0.190	0.271	-0.191
It's always the same people that determine the course of events anyway	-0.190*	0.057	-0.055
Constant	0.810	0.061	-0.196
<i>N</i>	241	182	461
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.278	0.279	0.238

<sup>a</sup>1 = Disagree, 2 = Partially disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Partially agree, 5 = Agree.  
\**p* < .10; \*\**p* < .05; \*\*\**p* < .01.

### Discussion and Conclusions

In the recent context of cuts in public funding and local governments' shifting responsibilities to citizens (van Dam, Duineveld, and During 2015; Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Koppenjan 2017), we examined the non-engagement of residents in civic initiatives that aim to maintain or improve local livability. We looked into both recent non-engagement and the lack of intention to do so in the future. We explored at the individual level if and how non-engagement can be explained by specific motivations and lacking abilities. We also checked whether “non-engagers” living in rural areas with a declining population where the urgency to engage is presumably higher, had specific reasons not to engage, and if living in such areas mattered for the level of non-engagement. Concerning *motivations not to engage*, we firstly wanted to know if and how satisfaction with the livability of the communities was of influence (Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk 2018; Howley, Scott, and Redmond 2009). We also looked into perceptions about government responsibility for warranting local livability (Ubels, Haartsen, and Bock 2019). Besides, we examined if residents disagreed with existing initiatives (Connelly 2011), had other priorities (Cleaver 2001; Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014; Shortall 2008) or were not willing to engage without substantiated reasons. Next to this, we considered if and how the affective bonds residents feel toward their communities had been of influence (Brennan and Luloff 2007; Hidalgo and Hernández 2001; Lewicka 2011), possibly

in interrelation with their sense of social belonging (Brennan and Luloff 2007; Crona and Bodin 2006; Walton and Cohen 2007; Walton et al. 2012). Concerning the *lacking ability to engage*, we explored if and how residents' expected level of influence mattered (Crona and Bodin 2006; Skerratt and Steiner 2013), as well as their perceived capacity (Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2014; Shortall 2008; Skerratt and Steiner 2013) and their sense of social belonging. To achieve this, we used survey data of a citizen panel in the Dutch province of Fryslân.

Firstly, we explored recent non-engagement in civic livability initiatives. It appeared that about 70 percent of our rural and 80 percent of our urban respondents did not recently engage in such initiatives. We found that citizen engagement was unevenly distributed across the population and occurred more often among higher educated older men with a higher income. Education, gender, and income, hence, affected engagement. As there was also an overrepresentation among this group in our dataset, it may be that non-engagement in Fryslân has been even higher. This does not mean that women, in general, engage less in volunteering than men: their level of engagement is more or less the same in the Netherlands. Women, however, are more often active in supporting and caring activities (CBS 2019). In line with findings of previous studies (Tonkens and Verhoeven 2012; 2018), our evidence suggests that men are more likely to become active in civic initiatives because of the steering roles these often require. As in previous research (Ubels, Haartsen, and Bock 2019), we found that those who engaged in citizen initiatives are also more active in other volunteering activities compared to those who did not engage in citizen initiatives.

The reasons for recent non-engagement were more or less the same for all types of areas. In particular, it turned out that many respondents had no time and, hence, in line with findings of Cleaver (2001) and Shortall (2008), had other activities that they prioritized over engaging. Many did also prefer to leave the responsibility for the local livability to the local government. Besides, our target group of aging respondents often felt too old and had health limitations, which withheld them from engaging, as Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer (2014) have found as well. It was, moreover, striking that "engagers" and "non-engagers" in both rural areas (with and without depopulation) had an overall satisfaction with the public space, the level of facilities, meeting opportunities, and social support in their community. As we expected, non-engagement, may, hence, be explained by the general satisfaction of the respondents with their local livability. The fact that many satisfied respondents did engage may indicate that engagement may also be driven by the wish to maintain the positively valued liveability issues. It is also possible that

respondents who engaged were more positive about their living environment because of their contribution. Other than we expected based on recent literature (Bock 2019; Hospers and Reverda 2012), it can be concluded that the loss of services did not enhance the level of engagement in rural depopulating areas; the engagement level was about the same as in rural areas where depopulation is not an issue.

In all areas, our respondents generally had a positive sense of affective and social belonging to their communities, which again for rural depopulating areas is contrary to what we expected. Therefore, we conclude that these factors have not been of influence on non-engagement in this case. Also here, it is possible that those who feel a strong sense of belonging, engage in order to preserve what they appreciate. It is possible as well that engagement increases the sense of belonging.

Furthermore, some other interesting differences between rural areas were found. In depopulating rural areas, non-engagement was most prominent among the lower educated, a group with a higher presence in these areas (Bock 2019). In the other rural areas, recent “non-engagers” referred more often to lack of time as a reason; this may indicate that they prioritized other activities above engagement in livability initiatives.

We also explored why recent “non-engagers” had no intention to engage in the future, which is the case for one-third of the rural and about 40 percent of the urban “non-engagers.” Such lack of readiness may have been even higher, as there was an overrepresentation in our dataset of a group who engaged more often: higher educated men. Again, we found no difference for respondents living in depopulating rural areas compared to other rural areas: in both cases, the majority of the respondents have not engaged recently, and about one-third of them had no intention to do so in the future. Similar to what is often suggested in recent literature, our study shows that this can partially be ascribed to specific motivations or lacking abilities. For the respondents living in depopulating rural areas, the lacking intention to engage in the future is explained by their lower feeling of community involvement. In the other rural and urban areas, non-engagement is explained by the idea that local livability is a governmental responsibility, as well as by the inability to engage because of age and health limitations. The main explanation we found, however, was for all areas the same: a general unwillingness to engage. In addition to Ajzen’s Theory of Planned Behavior (1985; 1991), this study indicates that also unsubstantiated motivations may explain people’s non-engagement in community-focused action.

In recent literature, civic engagement in rural community development has often been referred to as a positive and necessary development. In those areas where civic engagement runs low, this is explained

by a lack of empowerment and civic or community agency (Andrews et al. 2008; Brennan and Luloff 2007; Hafer and Ran 2016; Skerratt and Hall 2012; Skerratt and Steiner 2013). Our study shows, however, that residents may also not be willing to effectuate their agency by engaging in civic initiatives, without any substantiated motivations or lacking abilities for such a stand that may be addressed. This result questions the prevailing reasoning in both academic and policy-arenas that civic non-engagement is a problem that needs to be addressed and solved. Such an approach underpins the norm of engagement.

We may also ask ourselves if we, as a society, can expect individual citizens to take care of issues that are of general interest. It entails the risk, after all, that the needs and interests of the substantial groups of “non-engagers” remain unrecognized. Therefore, retreating local governments need to assure that the public interest is warranted and with that the wellbeing of all citizens.

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