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Social innovation and community-focussed civic initiatives in the context of rural depopulation: For everybody by everybody? Project Ulrum 2034

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we apply a civic perspective and social innovation theory to examine how residents of a Dutch village experiencing rural depopulation and austerity reforms evaluate a civic initiative aimed at improving liveability, and what explains their evaluation. Using multivariate statistical analysis, we found that most residents were positive about the initiative and its contribution to local liveability. We also discovered that a substantial group knew very little about the initiative and that low-income groups, in particular, lacked the interest to identify and become engaged with it. Voluntary engagement, however, did not necessarily result in a positive evaluation. Above all, tangible outputs explained citizens' appreciation. A perceived increase in collaboration within the village and novel forms of collaboration with the local government also proved important, but only when they were accompanied by realised tangible outputs.

1. Introduction

As in many rural areas in Europe, the Dutch peripheral countryside is increasingly confronted with the outmigration of young, more highly educated people and a declining and ageing population (Cloet, 2003; Reher, 2007; Hospers and Reverda, 2012; CBS, 2016; Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010). The last decade, particularly since the financial crisis of 2008, this demographic trend coincided with neo-liberalist welfare state reforms and austerity measures. Neo-liberalist ideas in which the provision of public goods is supposed to be more effectively and efficiently organised by shifting former public responsibilities to citizens whilst enabling a withdrawing government and cuts in public funding (Glenna et al., 2014) gained further ground in national policies and are reflected in commonly used terms of the so-called 'doing democracy' and 'participatory society' (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2013 [Ministerie van BZK]; State Government [Rijksoverheid], 2015). The combination of related developments, such as shrinking public budgets, an increase in the number of deteriorating and vacant houses, fewer shops, schools, healthcare, and transport facilities have contributed to decreasing liveability¹ in the more peripheral areas (Hospers and Reverda, 2012; Bock, 2016). As a response, governments tended to encourage and support civic initiatives in particular in the field of local liveability and

maintenance of public services. Ever since numerous examples of novel governance forms with citizens have been enacted with varying results (Ubels et al., 2019).

Until now such innovative arrangements have predominantly been evaluated based either on the policy objectives achieved or the appreciations by the immediate participants (de Haan et al., 2017). To our surprise, we could not find any studies that evaluated community-focussed initiatives based on the assessment by the citizens concerned. As socially innovative initiatives ultimately intend to contribute to liveability as experienced by residents, in our view a civic perspective can generate relevant new insights for both political and academic debate.

Issues of democracy and legitimacy in connection with community-based and participatory policy have been widely discussed in the academic literature. According to Skerratt (2016), there is evidence that locally led initiatives tend to empower local elites and that in such cases, existing power relationships and social stratification prevent inclusive outcomes and processes. Fischer and McKee (2017) underline that despite the positive connotations of community-led development, it can also be ineffective and unproductive. Their findings show that social capacities can be outright negative, refusing to become engaged with local initiatives or even applying purposefully counterproductive

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¹ Following Gieling and Haartsen (2017), liveability (*leefbaarheid* in Dutch) is a term that is commonly used in Dutch language and refers to individual perceptions of the requirements that villages must meet to be considered socially and physically liveable.

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strategies. Hafer and Ran (2016) and Skerratt and Steiner (2013) argue that individual reasons for becoming involved in or refraining from initiatives can be complex, inconsistent, temporary and strongly contextually determined, and are related to individuals' socially constructed identities. Furthermore, speaking more generally about community planning and innovation, numerous authors underline issues of residents' governance capacity, and point at the risk of the exclusion of marginalized groups as well as the possibility that developments might exacerbate unequal relations between and within communities (Gunn et al., 2015; Cowie and Davoudi, 2015; Healey, 2015; Neumeier, 2017).

In line with Connelly (2011), we assume in this paper that innovative governance practices are likely to be contested and surrounded by the contrasting and changing judgements of community members. Rural communities are clearly not homogenous but include individuals and social groups with varying attitudes, needs, capacities and perceptions (Ruth and Franklin, 2014; Healey, 2015; Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). So far, however, little is known about how novel civic governance initiatives are experienced by the community members to whose liveability they are supposed to contribute. This paper reports on a study that aimed to do just that: evaluating from a civic perspective an innovative civic initiative that targeted the realisation of community needs and values.

Using a village-wide survey and non-participatory observations, we analysed a comprehensive long-term citizen's initiative in the Dutch village Ulrum: Project Ulrum 2034. In just a few years, this initiative evolved into a project in which many local working groups, both autonomously and in collaboration with the local government and other formal partners, completed various subprojects to enhance the liveability of the village. Our central question is how residents evaluate this civic initiative and what explains their evaluation.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 2 we discuss social innovation theory in relation to our study and present our theoretical framework. Section 3 discusses the case selection, data collection, the operationalisation of the theoretical framework and the analysis and representativeness. Section 4 describes the results. The discussion is presented in section 5 and our conclusions in section 6.

2. Social innovation: a civic perspective on civic initiatives with a community focus

In this paper, we look at how residents of a rural village evaluate an innovative civic initiative that has been actively addressing local liveability issues over a period of several years. We also want to determine what explains their assessment. In the following section, firstly, we discuss the concept of social innovation in relation to our study. Secondly, we explain and motivate the structure of our theoretical framework.

2.1. Problems and potentiality related to the concept of social innovation

In current European political rhetoric civic initiatives focussing on meeting community needs through new forms of collaboration frequently are seen as social innovation processes. Such civic action is increasingly perceived as a positive development that can be realised through the stimulation of novel collaborations on the base of civic self-reliance and self-organisation. Particularly in the context of austerity measures, withdrawing local governments, depopulation, and ageing they are seen as a possible solution to contribute to local liveability and it is in that aspect that they differ from other bottom-up developments (Ubels et al., 2019; Bock, 2016). More specifically in the Dutch context, civic initiatives are generally considered to have the potential to realise innovative and locally specific liveability solutions which local governments are unable to achieve on their own. Policymakers also emphasise their potential of successfully increasing social cohesion and capacities (Gieling and Haartsen, 2017; de Haan et al., 2017). Following

Moulaert (2009, 2010), Bock (2016) and Neumeier (2017), we argue, however, that such a political account of the concept of social innovation can be problematic, particularly when it is used as an instrument to address local problems that are also caused by politics itself. It certainly carries along the risk of ignoring how innovative solutions are perceived by the rural residents whose liveability, in essence, it is all about and who, moreover, is supposed to play a central role in realising these.

In recent years, also in academic debate different aspects of social innovation and innovative local civic action have been discussed. For example, Moulaert (2009, 2010) emphasised the redistribution of power in urban settings, whereas in rural contexts Healey (2015) reflected on the legitimacy and democratic potential of new forms of governance; Neumeier (2012, 2017) identified specific success factors and mechanisms; Bosworth et al. (2016) proposed an entrepreneurial economic approach; and Bock (2016) distinguished general features and elaborated on how social innovation fits within existing rural development approaches. It appears that so far hardly any research has been done on how citizens experience social innovations with regard to their liveability and in particular when these have been functioning for a longer period.

In this paper, hence, we contribute to both political and academic debate by studying how such a long-term social innovation is evaluated from a civic perspective. We base our view of the concept of social innovation on studies of Moulaert (2009, 2010), Bock (2016) and Neumeier (2017). They share the basic idea that social innovations are beneficial for citizens and that the potential is in more effective community development through the novel and more direct forms of democracy. In such novel governance forms, citizens obtain a pivotal and structural role in the provision of facilities and services and, as such, contribute to their daily quality of life. In addition, related collaborative practices have a mobilising and empowering effect, as they improve social relationships and encourage civic learning and equality. We distinguish two dimensions in our analysis, firstly, the self-governance process of innovative civic action, and; secondly, the outcomes of such a process (Neumeier, 2017). In the process dimension, we assume that social innovation leads to a higher level of citizen engagement in realising community needs, and therefore to a higher level of inclusiveness and empowerment. Also, we assume that social innovation increases the level of mutual collaborations between residents and, as such, contributes to the perceived liveability. Furthermore, whilst applying a civic perspective we presume that the novel governance collaborations and structures of social innovation are perceived as positive developments by the residents concerned. In the outcome dimension, we assume that residents recognise and appreciate the positive results of such innovative practices. On the one hand, this can be in the social sphere when novel governance activities transform existing social relations within local communities for the better. On the other hand, this can be when more tangible community needs are successfully achieved by the novel collaborative activities, as it was found that actively participating citizens evaluated and supported civic initiatives mostly for their successfully achieved tangible outputs (Saleminck et al., 2016; Ubels et al., 2019).

2.2. Conceptual framework

In this paper we assumed that social innovation takes place in the social context of a rural village in which it interacts with residents who differ in their social relations, norms, values, needs and desires (Ruth and Franklin, 2014; Bock, 2016) as well as their feelings of attachment to the community and community-focussed projects (Healey, 2015). Therefore, firstly, we included sociodemographic characteristics in our conceptual framework, in order to understand if and how these explain the evaluation of a social innovation. Also, we explored how they relate to other elements of our framework when they are found to influence the evaluation (see Fig. 1). We then sought to determine the importance of people's basic ideas about social innovation, both in terms of processes

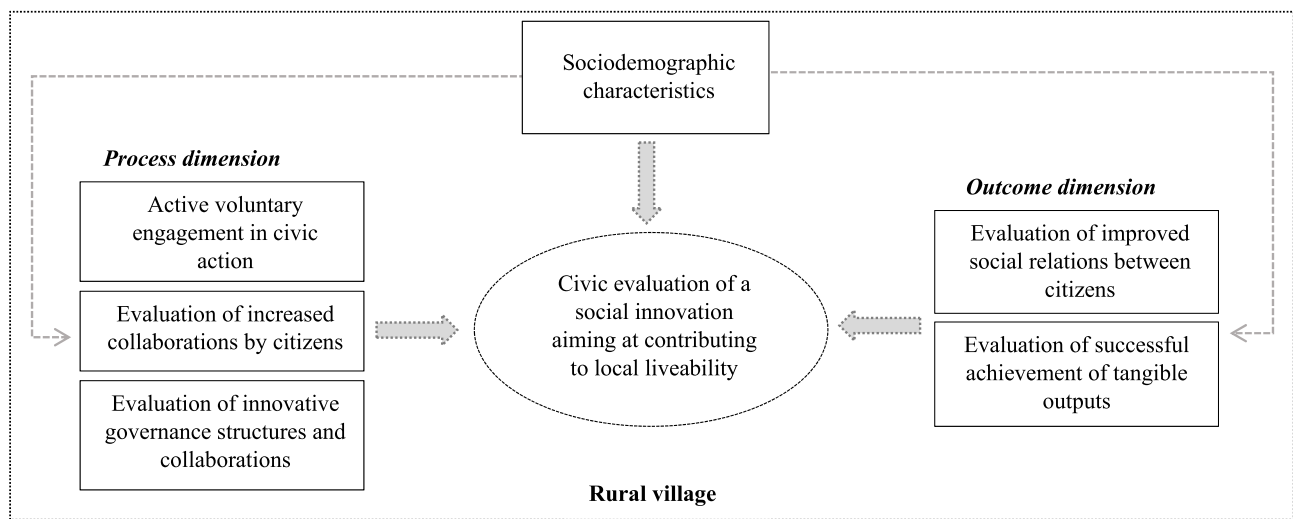


Fig. 1. Civic evaluation of a social innovation in a rural context.

and outcomes and whether this differs for different groups. In the process dimension, differences can be expected in a community's ability and willingness to become involved in an initiative (Fischer and McKee, 2017; Hafer and Ran, 2016; Gieling and Haartsen, 2017; Skerratt and Steiner, 2013). Hence, firstly, we considered which local groups are actively engaged in innovative civic action and to what extent their participation has affected their evaluation of it. As we considered citizen engagement in novel collaborations as an important element of social innovation, we determine if and how increased collaborations contributed to their evaluation. Furthermore, to determine how new forms of governance contributed to the residents' evaluation of citizens' action we included their assessment of innovative governance structures and collaborations within the community and with local government. In the outcome dimension, we considered to what extent the satisfaction of community needs mattered for the evaluation of an initiative. Firstly, we checked if social relations within the village improved and how this contributed to the resident's evaluation. Secondly, we included citizens' evaluation of the successful achievement of tangible outputs in our conceptual framework.

3. Methods

3.1. Case selection

This paper examines a civic initiative in the village Ulrum in which residents aimed at resolving local liveability issues: Project Ulrum 2034. We selected this initiative, firstly, because the first author was allowed to observe the interactions and decision-making of the initiative's core group over a period of several years. Also, it provided an opportunity par excellence to evaluate a novel governance form led by citizens after it had been active for a longer period of time (six years). Also, in the present Dutch policy context this initiative is considered as exemplary for citizen empowerment, increasing social collaboration and an effective alternative for mere government responsibility for addressing local needs.

Ulrum is a rural village with 1374 inhabitants (in 2016) in the North of the Netherlands, as can be seen in Fig. 2. Over the past twenty years, Ulrum has been confronted with the closure of its primary school, library, post office, town hall, bank, ATM, police station, around twenty shops and two supermarkets, and with the loss of its GP (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017). In addition, there was a growing sense of decline with regard to the physical living environment, because of an increasing number of vacant and poorly maintained houses. As a response, in 2010 four residents developed a plan to maintain and enhance local liveability

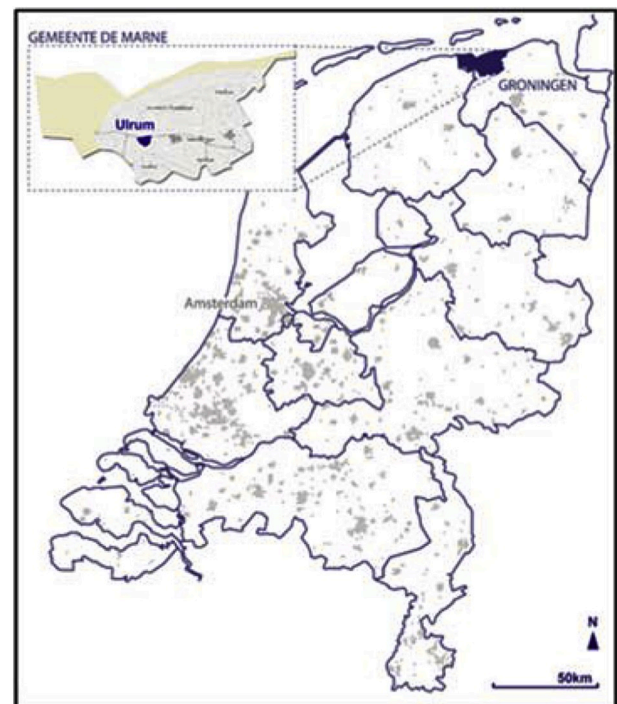


Fig. 2. Map of the Netherlands, the location of Ulrum (Christiaanse and Haartsen, 2017).

in collaboration with the local village association. Their main goals were to encourage local initiatives and creativity and to improve the physical environment in the village. The initiative is controlled by the democratically chosen village association, in which most households from within the village are represented. From 2010 to the date of writing, this initiative has been experimenting with local engagement and autonomy on the basis of a novel local organisational structure in which a local core group with autonomous working groups worked on specific sub-projects, as presented in Table 1.

One of the most remarkable achievements was an innovative governance partnership with the regional housing cooperation, the municipality, and the province. This was achieved, firstly, because the municipality was willing to support citizen action in order to find novel solutions for liveability issues (Gemeente De Marne, 2010). Also, it was

Table 1
Project Ulrum 2034 subprojects.

		Goal	Progress
Subsidy arrangement upgrading houses	Adapting houses to lifetime stages	Circa 160 residents benefitted before the funds were depleted	
Subsidy arrangement sustainability houses	Realisation of sustainability investments in privately owned houses, such as isolation and solar panels	Circa 160 residents benefitted before the funds were depleted	
Playground	Realisation of a spacious playground also for disabled children and target audience from elsewhere	Achieved. Difficulties in finding volunteers for maintenance	
Upgrading roads and art	Realisation of planters and artworks at the entrances to the village	Achieved. Difficulties in finding volunteers for maintenance of planters. The artworks are contested	
Land exchange with housing corporation	Demolition of social housing block and land exchange between housing corporation, the initiative, and private homeowners in order to enable the demolition of two dilapidated houses in the centre of the village and build replacements	Demolished housing block. The released plot was sold to the initiative and transformed into a park. The two decayed houses were bought by the housing corporation and have been demolished. Construction of new houses is scheduled	
Village care	To ensure that residents in need of care can remain in the village as long as they want	Achieved. Volunteer network throughout the village for any kind of support	
Treasure room village	Collecting stories and objects illustrating the history of the village	Achieved. Depot and exhibitions	
Cemeteries	Maintenance and upgrading of the local graveyard	Achieved. Cleaning and restoration of graves and realisation of commemoration area	
Historical church museum ^a	Realisation of a museum about the church history of the village ^a	In preparation. Time-consuming planning phase (organization structure, housing, and finances)	
Multifunctional centre	Purchase of empty house, conversion to multifunctional centre ^b	In preparation. Time-consuming planning phase with several conflicts	
Attracting tourism; developing watercourse	Realisation of a sailing circuit and restoration of old paths between villages	Cancelled because of lacking financing and political support	
Involving youth in park maintenance	Upgrade of a poorly maintained park by local youth	In preparation. Students submitted a design plan which is still to be realised	

^a Ulrum has a rich church history: the Secession of 1834, a schism within the state Dutch Reformed Church which resulted in the establishment of the Free Reformed Churches, was initiated in Ulrum by Rev. Hendrik de Cock. The project's name refers to this change-provoking initiative.

^b Health centre, meeting point, and facilities for playground.

introduced to the regional deputy who embraced it as an experiment and granted it an unusually high subsidy of EUR 1.5 million to invest in the liveability of the community. The municipality then involved the Housing Foundation for co-designing ways to address various urging housing issues in collaboration with project members. In this way, the initiative became a formally recognised and supported collaborative experiment with formal authorities under the ultimate responsibility of a civic core group. The subsidy arrangements for improving housing and sustainable homes were central to this arrangement, and the land exchange project and other subprojects were also financed in this way. In addition, the subprojects' costs, including those incurred for the 'liveability office' (*Leefbaarheidsloket*) and the local volunteering projects, were covered by non-governmental subsidies. In process terms it is important, firstly, to consider that the initiative was actively facilitated by an external liaison officer financed by the local government. Secondly, there were new collaborative interactions between volunteers within the village and between volunteers and external public and private professionals. In addition, students, researchers, and artists have been invited to contribute new ideas. These new experiences have been shared broadly, with government representatives and civil servants officials and officers, delegations of residents from other villages, politicians, research institutes and the media. Residents were also regularly invited to participate and to exchange new ideas at information sessions and workshops and are informed about the progress of the collaborative dynamics and the achievement of subprojects through monthly information bulletins.

At the time of the survey, six years after its start, the initiative had achieved many successes, but also encountered numerous difficulties. The formal partnership with the housing corporation and the local and regional government had been concluded and its results were evaluated positively. The initiative was also still attracting attention from outsiders and was widely celebrated. Nevertheless, quite a number of conflicts resulted from the participants' different perceptions about their roles, responsibilities, and goals. These tensions affected the relationships between volunteers of different projects and the village association. In addition, most of the working groups had gradually lost their initial energy and it had also become more difficult to find volunteers and to keep them motivated: meetings and workshops had become more poorly attended and some commentators suggested that the initiative was having a negative impact by widening social divides and deteriorating relationships within the village. Ultimately, the initiative was still a rather small core group of actively engaged individuals who carried the project while experiencing an ever-increasing overburden of responsibilities and lacking local support.

3.2. Data collection

A mixed-method approach was applied. In the period between 2015 and 2017, the initiative was followed from the inside by the first author through non-participant observations of core group meetings and interactions with local working groups, the community, government officials and other external partners. A field diary was kept with observations of the project dynamics, such as the collaborative experiences and interactions with external agents and community members. Further insights into the activities, appointments, and agreements were gained by reading weekly meeting reports, project mailings, the project website, and monthly newsletters. Also information was obtained through interviews, informal conversations and mail communication with the core group and working group members. We thus obtained in-depth insights into the collaborative dynamics and experiences from the perspectives of the key actors and the social and physical outputs achieved. The first author witnessed the commitment and engagement of these key actors and their efforts to activate and include more residents. Also, at occasions, observations were shared and reflected upon with project members.

The described information was, hence, mainly obtained from within

the initiative. This contains the risk of bias as the involved project members and governmental actors influenced it by their account of events. As we had no direct insights into how more, in general, the residents of the village experienced and evaluated the initiative, we decided to complement our information by a survey among the residents. We distributed this survey door-to-door to 611 households in the village residential area. We asked one adult per household to complete the survey. What we heard on the doorstep caused us to suspect that social housing residents might have particular concerns with the initiative. We decided, hence, to include ‘social housing’ as a specific socio-demographic characteristic in our analysis. In order to make this possible, we requested a list of the social housing addresses in the village from the municipality. In this way, we were able to identify this group when we recollected the distributed surveys a week after. We thus achieved a response rate of 47.5% (N = 291).

Based on our theoretical framework we used the indicators for assessing and explaining the village residents’ evaluation of this initiative as presented in Table 2.

Firstly, we wanted to know the extent to which the respondents valued the initiative and felt it was a positive, community-focused development. We achieved this by asking the respondents to grade the initiative and its subprojects (grades 1–10) and rate the statement (Likert scale 1–5): *I think that the project positively contributed to the village’s liveability*. Secondly, we wanted to know if and how specific social and demographic groups differed in their evaluations. We achieved this by including sociodemographic characteristics in the survey, as can be seen in Table 3. Thirdly, we wanted to understand the extent to which residents became actively engaged in the initiative, if and how this varied for specific social groups and if and to what extent this influenced their evaluations. We achieved this by asking whether the respondents were or had been engaged in the initiative and by comparing the outcomes to their sociodemographic characteristics. We also wanted to uncover whether the level of social collaboration between residents actually increased or was perceived to have increased, and if and to what extent this was related to their evaluation of the initiative. We achieved this by including the following statements (Likert scale 1–5): *I collaborate more with other residents because of the project*; *Residents collaborate with each other more because of the project than they did before it began* (in

Table 2
List of indicators.

Civic evaluation of a social innovation aiming at contributing to local liveability	Overall project ^a Sub-projects ¹ <i>I think that the project positively contributed to the village’s liveability</i> ^b
Active voluntary engagement in civic action	Are you involved or have you been involved in the project? ^c
Evaluation of improved social relations between citizens	<i>I don’t think that relationships in the village deteriorated because of the project</i> ^b
Evaluation of increased social collaborations between citizens	<i>I collaborate more with other residents because of the project</i> ^b <i>Residents collaborate with each other more because of the project than they did before it began</i> (in 2010) ^b <i>I participate less in improving the wellbeing and liveability of the village because of the project</i> ^b
Evaluation of innovative governance structures and collaborations	<i>I don’t think that the municipality should take over the project tasks from the village working groups</i> ^b <i>I think that residents should collaborate with the municipality</i> ^b
Evaluation of the successful achievement of tangible outputs	Sub-projects with tangible outputs ^a Sub-projects with few or no tangible outputs ¹

^a Grades (1–10): 1 = very negative; 10 = excellent.
^b Statements (Likert scale, 1–5): 1 = Disagree; 2 = Partially disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree.
^c Question: Yes/No.

Table 3
Sociodemographic characteristics and representativeness of the survey.

	% of respondents survey ^a	village
Gender		
Male	53%	50% ^c
Female	47%	50% ^c
Age		
18–24 years	3%	5% ^b
25–44 years	24%	23% ^b
45–65 years	27%	28% ^b
65 years and older	35%	22% ^b
Social housing	19%	26% ^b
Education level		
Lower education	43%	50% ^b
Secondary education	39%	43% ^b
Higher education	16%	7% ^b
Duration of residence		
0–10 years	15%	Unknown
> 10 years	85%	Unknown
Household composition		
Household: Living alone	23%	36% ^c
Household: Families with children	32%	33% ^c
Household: Couple without children	44%	31% ^c
Employed	60%	Unknown
Churchgoing	53%	Unknown
Voluntary activities^d		
Seldom or never (1)	28%	Unknown
Now and than (2,3,7)	32%	Unknown
Frequently (4,5,6)	40%	Unknown

^a N = 291 (village with 1374 residents). Numbers in valid percent. Residents with age >18 years, at household level.

^b From: www.marnecultuur.nl/open-data/feiten-cijfers-urium/ (2016), accessed on 01-12-2017.

^c From: [www.Statline.cbs.nl\(2013\)](http://www.Statline.cbs.nl(2013)), accessed on 10-10-2017.

^d 1 = Seldom or never; 2 = Less than once a month; 3 = Once a month; 4 = Once every 2 weeks; 5 = Once a week; 6 = Several times a week; 7 = Occasionally.

2010); and *I participate less in improving the wellbeing and liveability of the village because of the project*. The first author’s observations suggested that the initiative might also have had negative social consequences. To check if that was perceived widely within the village we added the statement: *I don’t think that relationships in the village deteriorated because of the project*. Furthermore, we wanted to find out how residents recognised perceived or evaluated the specific innovative governance aspects of the initiative and the extent to which this influenced their evaluations. We achieved this by including the following statements (Likert scale 1–5): *I don’t think that the municipality should take over the project tasks from the village working groups*, and *I think that residents should collaborate with the municipality*. Finally, we wanted to know if and the extent to which the successful achievement of tangible outputs influenced the evaluations of the subprojects and the overall initiative. On the basis of our theory and fieldwork observations, we decided to divide the subprojects into two main categories: first, subprojects with few or no tangible outputs, and second, subprojects with tangible outputs.

3.3. Data analysis

Firstly, we analysed how the initiative was graded and determined how many respondents were positive (5.5–10), negative (<5.5) or were neutral (no grading). We then calculated the percentages and the residents’ mean scores regarding the following variables: engagement; assessment of contribution to liveability, social outcomes and innovative governance features; and the two main subproject categories. The initiative includes over a dozen subprojects, some of which had been more or less successfully completed, and others which were still in progress or at an initial preparatory phase. We then divided these main categories into four different sub-categories of grades between 1 and 10. We added a fifth category for the respondents who had no knowledge of

any of the subprojects. We then tested whether the respondents who did not grade the initiative could be excluded from further analysis without substantially biasing the explanatory outcomes of the linear regression analysis, using the Pearson Chi and Cramer’s V-tests. Using the Pearson correlation test we checked if and how the results from the two main subproject categories could be explained using other variables than the achievement of tangible outputs. We then conducted a squared multi-linear regression analysis to explain the residents’ overall evaluation of the initiative. We constructed four regression models in which we included different possible explanatory issues step-by-step. In model 1 we started with the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents because their perspectives are central to this paper. In model 2 we added personal engagement in the activities of the initiative because we expected that residents who were actively engaged would be more outspoken in a positive or negative way than those who had not participated in the project. We also included the statement about the positive contribution of the initiative to the liveability of the village in this model, as this was the most important reason for starting the initiative. In model 3, we included statements about social outcomes and innovative governance features. We did this to determine if such ideas were recognised by the respondents and to what extent they were related to their evaluations of the initiative. In model 4 we finally added the two categories of subprojects: those with tangible outputs and those with few or no tangible outputs, because we expected these to be of the greatest influence on the residents’ evaluations. Finally, we used Pearson correlation tests to understand if sociodemographic groups differed in their evaluation of and engagement in project activities.

3.4. Sociodemographic characteristics and representativeness

Table 3 compares the percentage incidence of the various socio-demographic characteristics within the village and the survey respondents. Residents aged 65 and older, more highly educated residents and households without children are overrepresented. Residents living in social housing, lower education and residents living alone are underrepresented. This could indicate possible biases in the responses from these specific groups. Possible distortions to the results will be explicitly taken into account in the analysis where relevant. Furthermore, it should be underlined that the statistics for household composition within the village are somewhat outdated (2013). However, as the population between 2013 and 2016 decreased by only 10 individuals, we expect that the data are sufficiently representative.

4. Results

In 4.1 we present the results of the evaluation of the overall initiative and the variables introduced in 3.4. We also explain why and how the non-grading group is excluded from further analysis and which variables explain the evaluation of the two main subproject categories and to what extent. In 4.2 we describe the results of our linear regression analysis and explain what determines the evaluation of the initiative. Furthermore, we provide more detailed explanatory information about the sociodemographic groups which evaluated the initiative more positively or more negatively and whose members were actively engaged in the project activities.

4.1. Evaluation of the initiative

Fig. 3 provides a first overview of the distribution of the grades given to the initiative. It appears that overall perceptions of the project are positive. However, a relatively large group of residents, about a quarter of the respondents, did not know how to grade the project. As the residents who were more negative about the initiative – those living in social housing and with a lower level of education (see Table 7) – may have been underrepresented, it must be noted that the group of negative residents may be larger in reality than we found in our results. However,

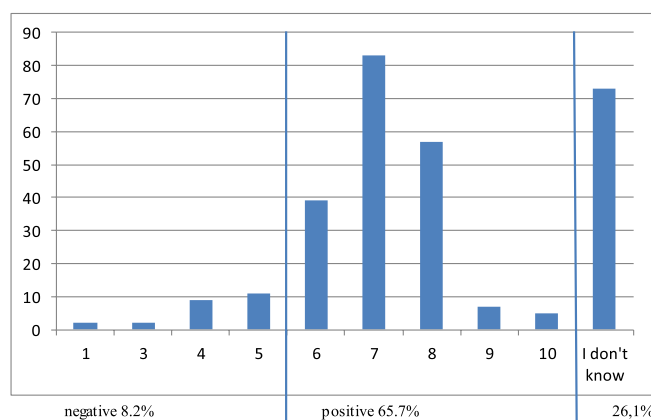


Fig. 3. Appreciation of the project: scale 1 (very weak)-10 (very strong) N = 291.

on the base of Table 3 it can be concluded hypothetically that even if all the residents at village level belonging to these groups had been negative about the initiative, the majority of the population would still have been positive.

Table 4 provides an overall overview of the responses and the mean scores on the survey questions.

It appears that the majority of the respondents were positive about the initiative: 66% awarded a positive score (6–10) to the overall project

Table 4

Descriptives of responses of residents (N = 291).

	%	mean scores
Engagement in project activities	13	
Engagement in subsidy schemes	9	
Appreciation of the overall project (1–10)		6.9
Negative (1–5.49)	8	
Sufficient-More than sufficient (5.5–6.99)	14	
More than sufficient-Good (7–8.49)	48	
Good-Very good (8.5–10)	4	
I don't know	26	
Statement on liveability (5-point Likert scale)^a		
I think that the project positively contributed to the liveability of the village		3.7
Appreciation of subprojects with tangible outputs (1–10)		6.7
Category 1: negative degree 1–5.49	12	
Category 2: positive degree 5.5–6.99	38	
Category 3: positive degree 7–8.49	44	
Category 4: positive degree 8.5–10	5	
Category 5: no knowledge of any of these sub-projects	1	
Appreciation of subprojects with few tangible outputs or none at all (1–10)		5.5
Category 1: negative degree 1–5.49	39	
Category 2: positive degree 5.5–6.99	37	
Category 3: positive degree 7–8.49	16	
Category 4: positive degree 8.5–10	2	
Category 5: no knowledge of any of these sub-projects	6	
Statements on social outcomes (5-point Likert scale)^b		
I collaborate more with other residents because of the project		2.5
I don't participate less in improving the wellbeing and liveability of the village because of the project		3.8
Resident collaborate with each other more because of the project than they did before it began (2010)		3.2
I don't think that relationships in the village deteriorated because of the project		3.8
Statements on innovative governance features (5-point Likert scale)^b		
I don't think that the municipality should take over the project tasks from the village working groups		3.2
I think that residents should collaborate with the municipality		4.4

^a 1 = Disagree; 2 = Partially disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Partially agree; 5 = Agree.

^b The original statements of the survey and their values have been reversed, because of their negative formulation.

(mean of 6.9) and 73% and a positive score to its subprojects with tangible outputs (mean of 6.7). With a mean of 3.7 (5-point Likert scale), the initiative is also considered to have contributed to the liveability of the village. It appears, however, to have hardly affected the level of collaboration and to have made little difference to what residents do for the community. Respondents indicate that the project did not encourage them to collaborate more with other village residents (mean 2.5), but neither did it negatively affect their investment in improving wellbeing and the liveability of the village (mean 3.8) nor did it deteriorate relationships within the village (mean 3.8). It is striking that respondents did feel that the initiative actually increased the collaboration between residents. They slightly agreed with the statements that residents collaborate more with each other because of the initiative (mean 3.2) and that village working groups do project tasks instead of the municipality (mean 3.2). They strongly agreed with the statement that residents and the municipality should collaborate (mean 4.4). It can be concluded from this that residents generally value the project's innovative governance features. This is, however, not reflected in a broad commitment through active engagement. Although the project's central aims included reinforcing local autonomy, actual engagement in the organization of project activities was confined to only 13% of respondents and engagement in the subsidy schemes to 9%. It can be concluded that only a small number of residents actively participated and became engaged in the initiative's new collaboration methods. Understandably, the subprojects with few or no tangible outputs received almost 30% fewer positive responses and had a considerably lower mean (5.5) compared to the subprojects with tangible outputs (6.7). The achievement of tangible outputs proved to have played a clear role in the evaluation of the initiative, as will be discussed below.

Most respondents in the group who did not know how to grade the initiative indicated having no (64%) or limited knowledge (30%) of the project. It would, therefore, be convenient to exclude this group from the further analysis of what explains their evaluation of the initiative. To determine whether such exclusion would substantively affect the explanatory values presented in Table 6, we performed Chi-square and Cramer's V-tests and compared their sociodemographic characteristics to the group who did grade the initiative.

The Chi-square test in Table 5 indicates that there appear to be substantive differences between the groups for three variables: church-going, duration of residence and volunteer work. However, with Cramer's V values of <0.5, these differences prove to be moderately too weak in their explanatory power. This implies that the no-grading group can be excluded without substantively altering the explanatory values of the project evaluation presented in Table 5.

As already explained in greater detail in 3.5, we divided the subprojects into two categories: subprojects with few or no tangible outputs, and subprojects with tangible outputs.

As can be seen in Table 4, the mean for the subprojects with tangible outputs (6.7) is considerably higher than for the subprojects with few or no tangible outputs (5.5). However, Table 6 shows that both positive and negative evaluations can be found in each of these categories. This is an indication that the achievement of tangible outputs alone does not explain the positive or negative evaluations of the subprojects within these categories. On the basis of the first author's observations, we can affirm that the positive or negative evaluations of the individual subprojects can be substantively explained by the characteristics, contexts, and dynamics of these subprojects. However, we conducted Pearson correlation tests to check if other variables also explain the evaluation within these categories. It appears that the social outcomes and innovative governance feature statements have partial explanatory value for the evaluation of the subprojects with tangible outputs and their relationship to the evaluation of the overall initiative. We found positive correlations between the subprojects with tangible outputs evaluated with mean scores of 7 or more and the following statements: *I collaborate more with other residents because of the project* (for grades awarded between 7 and 8.49: 0.220, $p < 0.01$ and for grades awarded between 8.5

Table 5
Comparison sociodemographic characteristics of the non-grading and grading residents.

	<i>I don't know^c</i>	Grading 1–10 ^a	Pearson's Chi ^b	Cramer's V
Gender			3.278	
Male	40%			
Female	60%	47%		
Age			5.168	
18 < 25 years	4%	2%		
25 < 45 years	26%	23%		
45 < 65 years	32%	41%		
65 + years	38%	34%		
Churchgoing			24.511*	0.292
No	65%	35%		
Yes	43%	57%		
Education level			1.233	
Lower	48%	43%		
Midlevel	41%	39%		
Higher	11%	18%		
Length of residence			15.280*	0.233
0–10 years	30%	10%		
>10 years	70%	90%		
Voluntary activities			39.943*	0.379
Rarely ^d	71%	53%		
Often	29%	47%		
Household composition			3.622	
Living alone	30%	21%		
Single parent with children	8%	7%		
Couple with children	45%	44%		
Couple without children	17%	27%		
Social housing	27%	16%	1.192	

^a We tested also a further distinction with I don't know, negative (1–5) and positive (6–10) grading. We found no substantive differences between the groups. This can be explained by the small size of the negative group.

^b * $p < 0.05$.

^c 64% of respondents indicated not or hardly knowing the initiative and 30% indicated that they knew the initiative neither hardly at all nor well.

^d Merged groups 'Seldom or never' and 'Now and then' (see Table 2).

Table 6
Appreciation subprojects: degrees scale 1–10 (very bad-excellent).

	Mean
Subprojects with tangible outputs	
Subsidy arrangement upgrading houses	7.2
Subsidy arrangement sustainability houses	7.0
Playground	6.7
Upgrading roads and art	5.6
Land exchange with housing corporation	5.5
Village care	7.3
Treasure room village	6.7
Cemeteries	7.5
Subprojects with few or no tangible outputs	
Historical church museum	6.0
Multifunctional centre	5.0
Attracting tourism; developing watercourse	6.1
Involving youth in park maintenance	5.3

and 10: 0.184, $p < 0.01$); *Residents collaborate with each other more because of the project than before it started* (for grades awarded between 7 and 8.49: 0.287, $p < 0.01$ and for grades awarded between 8.5 and 10: 0.146, $p < 0.05$); *I don't think that the municipality should take over the project tasks from the village working groups* (for grades awarded between 7 and 8.49: 0.312, $p < 0.01$; for grades awarded between 8.5 and 10: 0.182, $p < 0.01$); *I think that residents should collaborate with the municipality* (for grades awarded between 7 and 8.49: 0.236, $p < 0.01$). We also checked whether these social outcomes and innovative governance feature statements had any partial explanatory value for the evaluation

of the subprojects with few or no tangible outputs which were evaluated positively (Historical church museum and Tourist development and Watercourse). This was not the case.

4.2. Explanation of the evaluation of the initiative

In this section, we analyse what explains the residents' overall evaluation of the initiative. Table 7 presents four different regression models in which we added various possible explanatory issues step-by-step, as is explained in greater detail in 3.4.

Model 1 shows that female compared to male ($p < 0.01$, $B = 0.591$), residents with midlevel education compared to lower education ($p < 0.05$, $B = 0.648$) and couples without children compared to families with children ($p < 0.05$, $B = -0.547$) appreciate the project more positively, whereas residents of social housing ($p < 0.05$, $B = -0.612$) give a more negative appreciation. However, with an R-square of 0.158, it appears that this model has low explanatory power for the appreciation of the initiative.

In model 2, there are no significant differences between how the residents who have been actively engaged and those who have not participated in the project appreciate the initiative. It also appears that the appreciation of the projects' contribution to the liveability of the village has a positive relationship with the appreciation of the initiative as a whole ($p < 0.01$, $B = 0.501$). Similar to model 1, female compared to male ($p < 0.05$, $B = 0.459$), residents with midlevel education compared to lower education ($p < 0.01$, $B = 0.620$) and couples without children compared to families with children ($p < 0.01$, $B = -0.568$) appreciate the project more positively, whereas residents of social housing ($p < 0.05$, $B = -0.586$) also in this model tend to give a more negative appreciation. In this model the R-square and with it the explanatory power increases to 0.324.

Model 3 reveals a positive significant relationship between the appreciation of the overall initiative and the statement that residents collaborate more because of the project ($p < 0.01$, $B = 0.252$). It can be concluded that respondents appreciate the initiative among others because they think that it produces an increased level of social collaboration. There are, moreover, significant positive relations between the appreciation of the initiative and both statements about innovative governance features ($p < 0.05$, $B = 0.199$ and $p < 0.10$, $B = 0.206$). Here it can be concluded that respondents who appreciate the initiative more positively, also do so because they appreciated the development of new forms of governance and collaborations between residents and the municipality. Like in the first two models, female compared to male ($P < 0.05$, $B = 0.426$), residents with midlevel education compared to lower education ($p < 0.05$, $B = 0.500$) and couples without children compared to families with children ($p < 0.05$, $B = -0.567$) appreciate the project more positively, whereas residents of social housing ($p < 0.10$, $B = -0.586$) in this model still tend to give a more negative appreciation. In this model, the R-square increases further to 0.411.

In model 4, it appears that three sub-categories with positive appreciation for the sub-projects with tangible outputs have the highest predictive values of this model for a more positive appreciation of the initiative ($p < 0.01$, $B = 1.173$ for sub-category 2; $p < 0.01$, $B = 1.569$ for sub-category 3, $p < 0.01$, $B = 2.642$ for sub-category 4). In this model, the statements in model 3 about innovative governance features have lost their predictive values to the appreciation of the initiative. However, as we already demonstrated before, Pearson correlation tests revealed that these statements partially explains the appreciation of the sub-projects with tangible outputs and, therefore, also the appreciation of the overall initiative. Like in the former models, female compared to male ($p < 0.10$, $B = 0.316$), residents with midlevel education compared to lower education ($p < 0.10$, $B = 0.350$) and couples without children compared to families with children ($P < 0.05$, $B = -0.372$) still appreciate the project more positively, whereas residents of social housing ($p < 0.10$, $B = -0.372$) tend to give a more negative appreciation. In this model, R-square is highest at 0.523.

Table 7
Residents' appreciation of Project Ulrum 2034 initiative.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Sociodemographics				
Age	0.016*	0.005	-0.001	0.001
Female	0.591***	0.459**	0.426**	0.316*
Education (ref. lower education)				
Midlevel education	0.648**	0.620***	0.500**	0.350*
Higher education	0.340	0.318	0.298	0.244
Employment (yes = 1, no = 0)	0.222	0.242	0.092	0.214
Voluntary activities (ref. seldom or never)				
Now and then	0.316	-0.006	0.083	0.107
Frequently	0.174	-0.083	-0.124	-0.080
Churchgoing (yes = 1, no = 0)	0.209	0.207	0.081	-0.017
Household composition (ref. couple without children)				
Household with children	-0.547**	-0.568***	-0.567**	-0.464**
Living alone	-0.315	-0.299	-0.144	-0.232
Duration of residence	0.002	0.001	0.001	0.000
Social housing (yes = 1, no = 0)	-0.612**	-0.586**	-0.457*	-0.372*
Engagement in project (yes = 1, no = 0)	-	0.139	0.055	0.033
Statement on liveability				
I think that the project positively contributed to the liveability of the village	-	0.502***	0.257***	0.174*
Statements on social outcomes^a				
I collaborate more with other residents because of the project	-	-	0.026	-0.021
I don't participate less in improving the wellbeing and liveability of the village because of the project	-	-	-0.106	-0.011
Residents collaborate with each other more because of the project than they did before it began (in 2010)	-	-	0.252***	0.121**
Statements on innovative governance features				
I don't think that the municipality should take over the project tasks from the village working groups	-	-	0.199**	0.119
I think that residents should collaborate with the municipality	-	-	0.206*	0.103
Appreciation of subprojects with tangible outputs (ref. Category 1, negative appreciation, degree: 1-5.49)				
Category 2: positive degree 5.5-6.99	-	-	-	1.173***
Category 3: positive degree 7-8.49	-	-	-	1.569***
Category 4: positive degree 8.5-10	-	-	-	2.642***
Category 5: no knowledge of any of these sub-projects	-	-	-	No outcome
Appreciation of subprojects with few or no tangible outputs (ref. Category 1, negative appreciation, degree 1-5.49)				
Category 2: positive degree 5.5-6.99	-	-	-	0.014
Category 3: positive degree 7-8.49	-	-	-	0.062
Category 4: positive degree 8.5-10	-	-	-	-0.209
Category 5: no knowledge of any of these sub-projects	-	-	-	0.182
Constant	-0.078	4.966	0.929	2.374
N	198	198	198	198
R ²	0.158	0.324	0.411	0.523

$p < 0.10^*$; $p < 0.05^{**}$; $p < 0.01^{***}$.

^a Omitted statement because of multicollinearity: 'I don't think that relationships in the village deteriorated because of the project'.

In order to find more detailed explanatory information about the specific sociodemographic groups that appreciated the initiative more positively or more negatively and have been actively engaged in the project activities, we conducted Pearson correlation tests. For most of the groups with significant values in model 4, we found no plausible additional explanations about their commitment to the initiative. For the group living in social housing, however, we found that in particular the level of their collaborative interactions was less positively affected by the initiative. They had been less frequently been actively engaged in the initiative (-0.147 , $p < 0.05$), less frequently started collaborating more with other residents because of the project (-0.144 , $p < 0.05$), and more frequently indicated that the initiative had little or no influence on their contribution to the wellbeing and liveability of the village (0.147 , $p < 0.05$). We also found that the real increased level of social collaboration mattered most for a group that was already socially active and, therefore, more socially included. In addition, the group that has been actively engaged in the initiative more frequently started collaborating more with other residents because of the project (0.281 , $p < 0.01$), engaged more frequently in voluntary activities (0.281 , $p < 0.01$), and less frequently lived in social housing (-0.147 , $p < 0.05$). Next, we found evidence that suggests that socially included residents are more committed to the new ways of governance within the village. Firstly, the assumption that residents within the village started collaborating more because the initiative was adopted more by churchgoing residents (0.172 , $p < 0.05$), those who do more voluntary activities (0.168 , $p < 0.05$), those who have been actively engaged (0.178 , $p < 0.05$) and more frequently started collaborating more with other residents because of the project (0.326 , $p < 0.01$). In a similar way, more socially included groups are more in favour of citizens adopting public tasks: the statement that the municipality should not do the tasks of the initiative instead of village working groups is agreed more strongly with by churchgoing residents (0.150 , $p < 0.05$), by residents who indicated to have started collaborating more with other residents because of the project (0.187 , $p < 0.01$) and those who have been actively engaged (0.149 , $p < 0.05$). The statement that residents should collaborate with the municipality is also agreed more strongly with by respondents who are churchgoing (0.146 , $p < 0.05$) and more frequently started collaborating more with other residents because of the project (0.250 , $p < 0.01$).

5. Discussion

In the Dutch context of austerity and a withdrawing government, residents and local governments have been searching for novel ways to improve local liveability, particularly in peripheral rural areas. In this paper, we examined how residents evaluated a community focussed citizen initiative, and what explains this evaluation. To achieve this, we conducted a village-wide survey in which we asked residents to reflect on Project Ulrum 2034, a citizen-led project in the North of the Netherlands. In our analysis we related their evaluation to basic ideas of social innovation theory and, in doing so, made a distinction between process and outcomes as follows. In the process dimension, we wanted to know if the initiative contributed to higher levels of inclusivity and looked into the extent to which residents had been engaged in it. We also checked if the level of social collaborations between residents was perceived to have increased because of the initiative and if this had been indeed the case. In addition, we examined how residents perceived the shift in roles between citizens and the local government that took place in the novel local self-governance structure of the initiative. In the outcome dimension, we explored if residents experienced improved mutual social relations because of the initiative. We also assessed if residents perceived the initiative's achieved tangible outputs as successful.

We found that most residents were positive about the initiative and its contribution to local liveability. In general, both the social and physical aspects of community-focused development were approved of or were evaluated positively, such as novel forms of local collaboration and governance, and tangible outputs. Nevertheless, a small group evaluated the initiative negatively and a substantial group had limited to no knowledge about it. These outcomes can be explained as follows.

Firstly, we found the following sociodemographic characteristics had predictive value for evaluation: gender, household composition, education level and living in social housing. Female compared to male, residents with midlevel education compared to lower education and couples without children compared to families with children appreciated the project more positively. Further research is required to explain these results. Our findings with regard to social housing and less educated residents suggest that people with a lower socioeconomic status tend to have a lower commitment to the initiative. Previous research explained such lower commitment by, for example, social isolation or less ability to participate or become involved (Shucksmith, 2000); feeling less attached to the village or community (Healey, 2015); the fact that the needs of these groups are different from those met by the initiative (Bock, 2016); differing priorities, perceptions or visions; the complexity of relationships within the community (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013); and lack of interest in identifying and becoming involved in the initiative (Hafer and Ran, 2016). The residents who had little to no knowledge of the initiative were not representative of specific social or demographic groups. It can be concluded, therefore, that for a substantial group of residents, personal reasons for not becoming engaged in or identifying with the initiative prevailed. Further inquiry would be needed to find more detailed explanations of these social, demographic and individual differences in the commitment of residents towards innovative community-focused civic initiatives.

Secondly, contrary to our expectations, we found that active voluntary engagement was generally of no influence on the positive or negative evaluation of the initiative. The group of social housing residents, however, was less engaged and, as previously noted, evaluated the initiative more negatively. Vernon et al. (2005) and Marquart-Pyatt and Petzelka (2008) point out that refraining from voluntary engagement can be attributed to distrust and scepticism and weak social integration stemming from a lack of social ties, of shared identities and of personal attachment to the community. Another explanation might be that local initiatives addressing liveability issues offer socially marginalized groups too little to identify and become engaged with (Healey, 2015; Hafer and Ran, 2016). Or perhaps involved citizens lack the ability to create or strengthen interpersonal ties with such groups (Weisinger and Salipante, 2005).

Thirdly, our results show that residents evaluate the initiative more positively because of the initiative's positive impact on the level of social collaboration. It is striking here that we also found that the actual increase in collaboration at the village level seems to have been rather limited and that the small group which indicated having achieved such an increased level of social collaboration was already socially active in different ways. Further inquiry is needed to determine why residents presume higher levels of social collaboration and value local civic initiatives as a consequence, and for whom and in what way this is actually the case.

Fourthly, we found that innovative governance features, such as citizen self-governance and the novel collaboration with the local government, contributed to the appreciation of the initiative and that socially included groups are more committed to the new methods of governance in the village. This can be explained by these groups' stronger attachment to the village or community and therefore their greater willingness to identify with the initiative (Healey, 2015; Hafer and Ran, 2016).

Finally, in line with findings of Salemink et al. (2016), de Haan et al. (2017) and (Ubels et al., 2019) we also found that residents particularly appreciate civic actions because of their tangible outputs. This positive

evaluation, however, is also explained by the appreciation of increased social collaboration and innovative governance structures and organization, in line with what policymakers assume (Gieling and Haartsen, 2017; de Haan et al., 2017). This suggests that most residents do value increased collaboration levels within their village and novel methods of collaborating with the local government, but only when this is accompanied by tangible outputs.

6. Conclusion

Altogether, it can be concluded that the social innovation central to this paper was perceived as a positive development from a civic perspective and that, in general, citizens can appreciate such initiatives independent of their active participation or empowerment. The first author's observations show that serious effort was made to include as many residents as possible in achieving community-focussed needs and values. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrate that the Ulrum project contributed only to a limited extent to active civic engagement and, hence, to empowerment and equality. It certainly did not contribute to an increased level of social collaboration and empowerment for socio-economically weaker groups.

Our observations and findings raise several issues about some of the basic ideas of social innovation theory that relate to the process dimension. As previously said, it appeared that most residents appreciated the initiative for its supposed contribution to higher levels of social collaboration. On the individual level, it nevertheless turned out that mobilisation and, hence, personal inclusion and empowerment, for most residents were no prerequisites for a positive evaluation. When also arguing that it can be legitimate and reasonable not to be engaged in such activities (Skerratt and Steiner, 2013), also for socioeconomically weaker groups, further inquiry and reflection of the concepts of inclusivity, empowerment, and equality are needed. It can be asked if skewed participation acceptable as, as long as everyone had the opportunity to engage or has access to the community-focussed outputs? Recent studies show, however, that a lack of wider involvement in such initiatives carries the risk of increasing social inequality by further empowering the elite (Skerratt, 2016) or newcomers (Gustafson, 2009; Benson and Jackson, 2012). Our case study confirms the empowerment of the small core group who run the project and increased its governance capacity, learning from interactions with various professionals and local working groups. Given this group's considerable efforts to engage more residents in the project's activities and their difficulties and often disappointing results, it not only requires further reflection if higher levels of inclusion, empowerment, and equality should always be achieved but also how this may be realised. From both theoretical and policy perspectives, social innovation is all about citizens meeting local needs in novel, more inclusive and equal ways, with socially and physically beneficial outcomes. But it is problematic to assume that volunteers in depopulating and peripheral communities have the time and competencies needed to achieve this, to shoulder the various responsibilities and handle the frequently complex and differentiated local social realities successfully (Fischer and McKee, 2017; Hafer and Ran, 2016; Healey, 2015; Gunn et al., 2015; Cowie and Davoudi, 2015). It is also problematic to assume that volunteers can make legitimate appeals to their neighbours and hold them accountable for their engagement and commitment to community-focused projects. In addition to several inefficiencies, these dilemmas also cause personal frustrations, interpersonal friction and carry with them the real risk of volunteer burnout (Salemink et al., 2016).

From a government perspective, moreover, this case-study reveals an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the local governments want to shift part of their responsibility for the liveability of villages towards their residents. On the other hand, this study demonstrates that the engagement and support of the government are indispensable for the success of such social innovations. In our case, the support of EUR 1.5 million provided by the regional government eased the realisation of

several of the projects' objectives. This substantial financial impulse, however, was both a one-time opportunity and a politically controversial experiment, which, as such, is unlikely to be repeated in other communities. Nonetheless, the conclusions of this study have a broader scope: the results reveal that residents in their appreciation are mainly concerned with what has been tangibly realised for the community and there are no indications that the level of involved finances of such outcomes mattered.

More in general, next to potentialities, innovative responsibility shifts from municipalities to their residents regarding liveability issues have their limits. Firstly, not all administrative and political organisations of rural municipalities are sufficiently ready and prepared to collaborate with residents and support their initiatives (Ubels et al., 2019). At the local political level, it also needs reflection how the support of forms of direct democracy relate to the existing forms of representative democracy and how the legitimacy of such support can be warranted within and between communities (Connelly, 2011). This is undoubtedly a complex matter to be reinvented again and again in which role tensions may arise between municipal organisational pillars, politicians, and citizens (Ubels et al., 2019). Secondly, it is important to consider that within and between communities there are differences in citizen capabilities and willingness to engage (Fischer and McKee, 2017) and particularly in marginalized areas residents often are less equipped to contribute to local liveability (Bock, in press). There is no overall recipe for rural municipalities to guarantee the liveability of their villages in innovative ways including residents. Altogether, it requires a refined balancing act between taking the final responsibility when needed and supporting citizen initiatives when possible. This entails tailor-made approaches in the various local socio-cultural and political contexts, and, as our case-study suggests, a high level of municipal involvement at the village levels.

Conflicts of interest

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