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

Publication date:
2019

An evolutionary perspective on experimental local governance arrangements with local governments and residents in Dutch rural areas of depopulation

Hiska Ubels, Bettina Bock and Tialda Haartsen
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract
Population decline, welfare state reforms and austerity measures pressurise the liveability of rural areas in the Netherlands and call upon local governments and communities to adapt and renew their mode of governance. This paper reports on three Dutch experimental governance arrangements which are analysed through the lens of Evolutionary Governance Theory. The study focuses on how decision-making roles change while these arrangements unfold and how the three municipalities institutionalise these changes in the course of time. The study produces three main conclusions. First, the readiness and preparedness of local governments to shift decision-making roles with citizens proved to be of main influence on governance change. Second, local residents' commitment importantly affected the progress of the experiments, while social cohesion and tangible outputs strongly influenced the extent and continuity of such commitment. Third, although the arrangements took place in the same period of time and abovementioned context, the level of institutionalisation of shifting roles between government and residents differed among the cases. Certain pathways of evolving decision-making roles seem to be more stable than others. It is in this area that the extent of both formal and informal institutionalisation seems to play an important role.

Corresponding author:
Hiska Ubels, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 800, 9700 AV Groningen, The Netherlands.
Email: h.ubels@rug.nl

Introduction

At present, 25% of European rural areas are facing structural population decline (Cloet, 2003; Hospers and Reverda, 2012; Reher, 2007). In the Netherlands, this is the case for about one-third of the municipalities, of which most are located in the peripheral rural areas (Haartsen and Venhorst, 2010; Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, 2010). This places pressure on the liveability[1] of these communities in a variety of ways, including an increasing number of vacant houses and degrading neighbourhoods, disappearing services and facilities and decreasing community finances (Hospers and Reverda, 2012; Korsten and Goedvolk, 2008). Once a declining and ageing population was recognised as an urgent policy problem, policy-makers accepted the need to adapt existing modes of governance in order to handle the related challenges. In 2009, this search was institutionalised in the national Inter-Municipal Action Plan Population Decline (Hospers and Reverda, 2012). This development went along with austerity measures and public budget cuts after the financial crisis of 2008. In the same period, welfare state reforms were instigated at the national level turning public into private responsibilities and delegating national tasks to local governments. The reform was discursively presented as a turn towards a 'participatory society' and 'doing democracy' in which citizens take up caring for one another and self-reliance replaces state dependency. At the same time, local governments were given new responsibilities, particularly in the field of social care and local wellbeing for which they were supposed to be particularly suited given the supposed proximity between citizens and local governments (Ministry of Internal Affairs [Ministerie BZK], 2013; ROB, 2012; State Government [Rijksoverheid], 2015; Verhoeven and Tonkens, 2013; WRR, 2012). The reform accompanied severe budget cuts that resulted in the centralisation of services and facilities in some selected places (the so-called core towns or villages) and their closure in the surrounding areas. Altogether, these developments raised awareness, particularly in rural areas experiencing population decline, new solutions needed to be found to maintain their liveability (Bock, in press).

In the context outlined above, this paper examines three Dutch cases of rural governance arrangements that experimented with shifts in responsibilities and decision-making power for addressing liveability issue from local governments towards residents. The main objective is to understand how such arrangements evolve in time and how decision-making roles are rearranged. This resulted in the following research questions. First, how have experimental governance arrangements which aim to address liveability issues in rural communities evolved in time? Second, how did that go along with shifts in decision-making roles between local governments and residents? Third, how has the shift in decision-making roles been institutionalised within the different municipalities? Following Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT), this paper focuses on the local level with its unique governance pathways and dynamic interactions between changing actors, institutions and knowledge (Beunen et al., 2015; Van Assche et al., 2014).

This paper is structured as follows. The next section presents this study's theoretical framework, drawing on EGT. The 'Methodology' section discusses the case selection, data collection, and data analysis. Then a short overview of the selected cases is provided. This is followed by a section that describes the results regarding the evolution of the experimental arrangements from the cases of Beltrum, Nieuw-Dordrecht and Ee. The conclusions are presented in the final section.

EGT and experimental local governance arrangements

For a number of decades, the use of expert knowledge was considered essential to high-quality planning practices. However, particularly since the 1990s, theoretical perspectives on

planning rationality have changed. There is general acceptance now that facts and logic are not given but socially constructed and that planning practices are as much about the processes of decision making as they are about content (Van Dijk and Ubels, 2016). For example, Fischer and Forester (1993) have been influential by introducing a post-positive perspective in planning theory, known as the argumentative turn, in which planning and policy are seen as practical processes of argumentation and deliberation. Additionally, authors such as Healey (2003, 2015a, 2015b), Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) and Innes and Booher (2004, 2010) made a significant contribution to this field by providing interpretative, deliberative and collaborative accounts of planning. Van Assche et al. (2014) and Beunen et al. (2015) extend on such post-structuralist and social-constructivist epistemologies by providing an evolutionary perspective of governance: EGT. As this article focuses on processes of change and development pathways, it is these lenses of evolution that we put to use, rather than focusing on identifying particular forms of governance.

In doing so, we apply the broad definition of governance provided by EGT: *the taking of collectively binding decisions for a community in a community, by governmental and other actors* (Beunen et al., 2015: 20). In EGT, changes in governance are always realised through the evolution of its elements and, therefore, through self-transformation. These elements, such as actors and institutions, are interdependent and their co-evolution can take any structure and functioning in specific local realities.

In our analysis of changing modes of local governance, we put emphasis on the evolution of EGT's three interconnected dependencies of governance: *path dependence, interdependence* and *goal dependence* (Van Assche et al., 2014). The first, *path-dependence* refers to any legacy from the past that influences current governance configurations. The second, *interdependence* relates to the interrelations between various elements of physical and discursive realities and between different governance paths. The third, *goal dependence* is the influence of shared visions of the future and its effects on the contemporary co-evolution of actors, institutions and decision making. The interplay between these different dependencies generates rigidities but also contingencies that initiate flexibility: both can be limiting and productive in governance path creation.

In EGT, these interdependencies consist of three meta-configurations that co-evolve in interplay and mark a certain governance-path: *formal/informal institutions, actors/institution* and *power/knowledge*. In order to grasp the modes of change, we also include these in our framework. The first, the *configuration of informal/informal institutions* shapes the second: the *actor/institution configuration*. The coordination of governance is always done through the formal or informal rules of the game: institutions. The effects of such informal and formal institutions depend on how and to what extent they are embedded in the constellation of other institutions and actors. In any governance path, actors and institutions need to be seen in relation to each other, as they shape each other and depend on each other in ongoing transformations. The third, the *power/knowledge configuration* refers to the ways in which understanding and controlling issues connect to one another as from a Foucauldian perspective the two cannot be separated. Power is not only a matter of intentional use and authority but is deeply entangled in social relations and understandings. Knowledge is understood as discourse and can mark institutions, actors and their roles.

Following EGT, next to analysing interdependencies, configurations and the way they change in relation to each other, we also highlight what affects the direction of change through *context, path-dependency* and *contingencies*. Governance paths always find their origin in unique cultural and historical contexts. Hence, it is inevitable to emphasise previously produced elements and structures, as they are pre-conditional for the reproduction of existing governance pathways and, as such, generate path-dependency. Changes in

path-directions can occur through contingencies in the form of unanticipated circumstances and events.

In order to provide an schematic overview of the governance pathways in terms of decision making between local governments and residents, we borrow concepts from the government participation ladder of the Dutch Council for Public Governance (ROB, 2012). The ROB is a formal advisory council for the Dutch government and parliament that in 2012 advocated to proceed to joint governance with citizens and to adopt the responsibility to facilitate and support citizens' active engagement in public issues. This advice played an important role in the Dutch discussion about good governance and had a substantial influence on the aspirations of all levels of government. The ladder distinguishes different ways of joint engagement in decision making and, as such, marks particular modes of governance. These are ideal-types with a normative connotation, as is also the case for other participation ladders (Arnstein, 1969; Hurlbert and Gupta, 2015; International Association for Public Participation [IAPP], 2014; Kotus and Sowada, 2017). In this paper, it is not our aim to measure the extent of role shifts or judge the direction taken in a normative way. We use this ladder just as a heuristic tool for providing an overview of the pathways through which specific governance arrangements between local governments and residents evolved. While focusing on government and citizen actors, our analysis will be supplemented by an account of the roles of other influential actors on the complex set of changing interdependencies and hence on governance transformation.

The first distinguished level of ROB, *releasing*, refers to the absence of substantive government interference in decision-making processes of citizens. The second, *facilitating*, indicates governments as facilitator of civic initiative, who does not have any decision-making power, but may affect public proceedings and outcomes. The third, *stimulating*, refers to the government encouraging citizens to act upon the realisation of particular policies or interventions and to manage initiatives themselves on the base of shared decision power with the government. The fourth, *directing*, implies governmental direction and control of decision-making processes while allowing citizens a substantive role. The fifth, *regulating*, indicates a vertical hierarchical governmental position towards an initiative, implying the use of formal regulation and law enforcement.

Methodology

Case selection

This study examines three governance experiments in which local governments and residents are developing new governance arrangements that include a shift of responsibilities and decision-making power towards residents. These cases are located in depopulating rural regions (CBS, 2016), as is illustrated in Figure 1.

The three initiatives were selected on the basis of their 'extremity', 'paradigmatic value' and 'maximum variation' (Flyvbjerg, 2006). They are extreme in the sense that they are publicly acknowledged as significant innovations in rural governance. Their 'paradigmatic value' is reflected in their novel governance forms (see 'Introduction' section). Moreover, the three cases represent a 'maximum variation' in how these arrangements were initiated (see 'EGT and experimental local governance arrangements' section): the *Kulturhus* of Beltrum started as a citizen initiative and could soon rely on government support and facilitation; the Village Cooperative (VC) in Nieuw-Dordrecht started as a joint initiative of a number of partners, including the local government and residents; and the Village Development Company (VDC) experiment of Ee was initiated by the local government, which then invited citizens to participate.
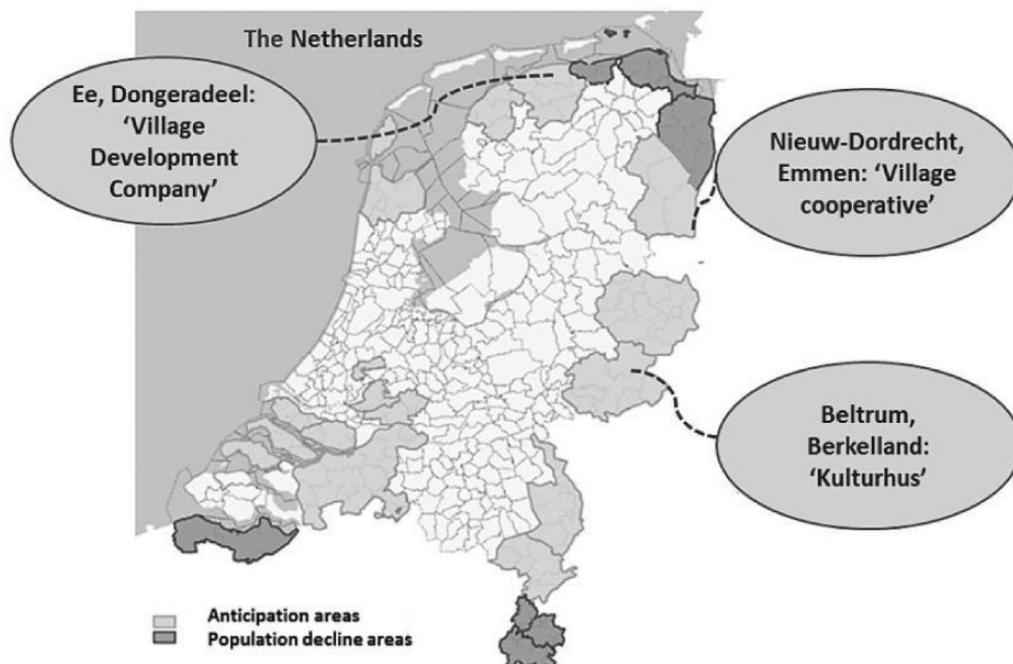
Figure 1. Case locations in areas with formally recognised rural population decline and where this is anticipated.
Source: DLG Ministry of Economic Affairs (2011).

Data collection

We collected data through face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews which were supplemented by telephone conversations and e-mails to follow up on questions. We also used written sources as is explained for each case more in detail in the following. The interviewed persons were key persons with extensive knowledge of the developments of the initiatives or with an overview of changing local governance over time. These informants were put forward by key persons of Dutch professional networks dealing with population decline issues. The interview questions concerned: the governance dynamics between the involved local governments and residents; determining developments and events in the governance processes and for the social and tangible outputs; historical local governance context, and future expectations regarding the initiatives and governance transformation at the municipal level. In the interviews, it was confirmed that in the council period of 2010–2014, governance with residents came up as an important subject and that in this period novel governance arrangements with residents started to emerge. As such arrangements and the governance transformation related to those initiatives are central, we focused on relevant written sources from 2010 until 2016.

In the Beltrum case, the interviews were conducted with a civil servant who had insight in the process of changing governance, the governmental village coordinator who facilitated the initiative, the chair of the *Kulturhus*-working group and the daily manager of the *Kulturhus*. In addition, we collected the following documents: the project plan of the initiative; the report of a study of cases in the Netherlands with changing roles between local governments and citizens, amongst which the case of Beltrum; the council decision about

financial support of the initiative; a local policy paper on the subject of joint governance with residents that was published after the realisation of the *Kulturhus*, and the political agreements of 2010–2014 and 2014–2018. In the Nieuw-Dordrecht case, the interviews were conducted with a civil servant, an engaged external advisor and an interim board-member of the VC initiative. The following documents were collected: publications about the VC and its dynamics; a survey report of local support for the VC initiative; an governmental interim project evaluation; the governmental plan of innovative governance experiments; and the political agreements of 2010–2014 and 2014–2018. In the Ee case, interviews were conducted with two civil servants who had been involved in the design and the implementation phase of the initiative; an external liaison officer contracted by the local government for exploring the possibilities of the VDCs and its eventual facilitation; and two involved residents who became local VDC members. We also analysed the project plan and manual for the VDCs; an explorative report for VDC-related opportunities on the village level; informative and promotive bulletins; the political agreements of 2010–2014 and 2014–2018; and the policy programme of 2011–2016 about liveability and living.

Data analysis

We analysed the interviews and the documents, in order to reconstruct the development paths of the governance arrangements and see how these influenced the local governance pathways of decision making between local governments and residents. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions as well as the documents were coded, and in doing so, the following distinctions were made: historical governance context; governance dynamics of the arrangements; influential events; influential actors; social and spatial outcomes in the public sphere; decision-making roles based on ideal types of the ROB-participation ladder; and future expectations about the arrangements and local governance with residents. Interim analysis and conclusions have been cross-checked on correctness by interviewed key-informants of all cases, and the final analysis and conclusions have been elaborated on the basis of this.

The selected initiatives: Kulturhus in Beltrum, the VC of Nieuw-Dordrecht and the VDC of Ee

The Kulturhus of Beltrum

In the village of Beltrum (3000 inhabitants), in 2008, a local working group of engaged residents instigated a study into future community accommodation needs. They found themselves confronted with a combination of high daily maintenance costs of the poorly used community centre and other community-associated buildings and an increasing number of disappearing facilities. This convinced a large number of organisations within the village and the local government to develop a more efficient way to manage accommodations both in terms of combining activities and financial exploitation. Of several potential scenarios, the concept of *Kulturhus* was chosen: a new multi-functional community centre based on a social enterprise model. This concept included the construction of a new building and the combined use of existing buildings in which more than 30 local parties participated, including the church, the primary school, the retirement home, the youth foundation, local entrepreneurs and the local government. In this way, the use of the existing buildings was optimised and as well a number of new functions were realised, such as a village library, an ATM, physiotherapy, and a rentable room for different meeting purposes.

The VC of Nieuw-Dordrecht

In the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht (1600 inhabitants) in 2011, *Plaatselijk Belang* (local association representing village interests) of Nieuw-Dordrecht, the local government, and a number of other formal partners raised the idea of founding a local VC and prepared its realisation. After its legal foundation in 2013, the main objective became the establishment of a social enterprise that could take control of public services, such as the management of public green areas and the maintenance of social properties. The government budget for these services was meant to be transferred to the VC, a method inspired by English examples of the 'right to challenge' and the 'right to bid'. The idea behind this citizen budget experiment was that the realised cost savings would be invested in the village or divided among the VC members. By 2015, with the facilitation of the local government, the VC had realised various tangible outputs, such as the demolition of an unsightly building in a central green space in the village, the restructuring of the church square and the construction of bicycle and foot pathways.

The VDC of Ee

In 2011, the local government of Ee was faced with a substantial unforeseen financial surplus which became the incentive for a collaboration between the local government and a number of national and regional parties. The main concern of these groups was finding a solution for the physically degraded and formally protected historical centres of four small and scattered villages: Ee, Holwerd, Metslawier and Paesens/Moddergat. In 2013, the four-year experiment of 'sustainable protected townscapes' started in order to improve degraded houses and the public space and to initiate local socio-economic projects. At the core of the VDC experiment was the joint management of available subsidies by the local government and a selection of residents. The focus of this study is the village of Ee (850 inhabitants), where this experiment resulted in the realisation of the improvement of dozens of houses, the public playground and the cemetery; the construction of hedges and pathways; public information signs; preparations towards a local museum; and appliances for the community centre.

Evolution of the experimental arrangements of Beltrum, Nieuw-Dordrecht and Ee

The following subsections discuss the different pathways of the experimental governance arrangements in which local governments and residents participate. The decision-making pathways are presented first, followed by the development of the arrangements in time, and finally, it is analysed how the shift in decision-making roles was institutionalised within the different municipalities.

Pathways of decision making of the governance arrangements

All three initiatives searched for ways to address local liveability issues by experimenting with novel forms of governance. Still there are evident differences in the initiation of the arrangements, as well as the ways in which the redistribution of decision-making power between the local governments and residents evolved over time. The Beltrum case started as a bottom-up citizen initiative without substantial involvement of the local government in the decision-making process. Then, the local government facilitated the process for a period after which the initiative regained autonomy. The process was quite different in the Ee case,

where the local government together with formal regional partners started directing the design of the initiative and its decision-making structure which, at its turn, was based on joint decision making. In time, the government turned towards a position as facilitator backing up any initiatives proposed by the VDC. The VC of Nieuw-Dordrecht began as a joint initiative between the local government, residents, and other formal partners. Facilitated by the local government, the VC board soon began exploring the possibilities of becoming an autonomous social enterprise. Due to a conflict, it failed to realise this goal and returned to its prior advisory position within a formal consultation structure under government direction. In Figure 2, these trajectories are illustrated by using the ROB participation ladder that distinguishes different levels of government and citizen participation in decision-making processes.

Development of local governance experiments in time in terms of decision-making roles

The Kulturhus of Beltrum. After the merging of several municipalities into one large municipality in 2005, the new local government of Berkelland developed an area-oriented approach, in order to gain better access to the villages and to address local liveability issues more effectively. In addition, the organisation structure of the municipality was transformed by reducing management layers with the aim of increasing its efficiency and accessibility for citizens. Following the village coordinator who acted as broker between residents and the local government, these developments allowed the local government to gain experience in deliberating with citizens about community development. The village of Beltrum at its turn counted with a long tradition of *Noaberplicht* (or neighbourly duty) which is a local informal institution, deeply embedded in the social structure and culture
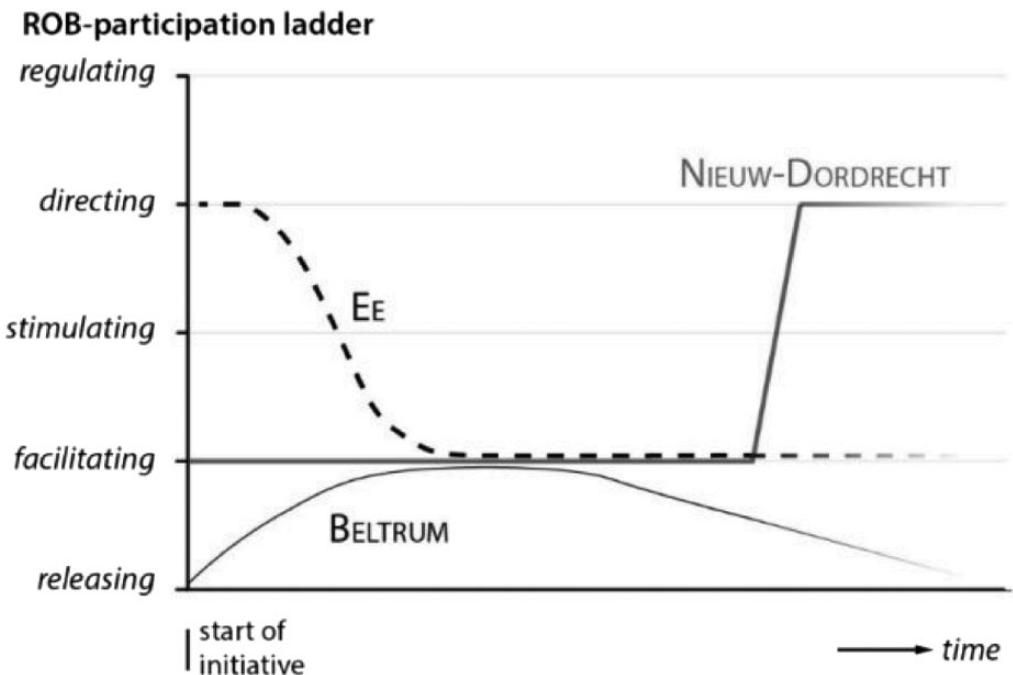

Figure 2. Decision-making pathways of the governance arrangements.

that reflects a highly valued sense of duty to assist one another. This explains the engagement of almost half of the residents in the vast number of associations in the village.

It was in this local governance context, in 2008, that in Beltrum residents established a working group for investigating how to optimise the different services and facilities that community accommodations offered could be optimised. A board member of the local umbrella organisation in which all local associations participated, became the driving force behind this initiative. After 2008, the combination of austerity measures and demographic changes gave an impulse to local politicians and policymakers to approach societal initiatives as a means to solve local liveability issues. Consequently, the newly elected local government in 2010 announced to adopt a facilitating and stimulating role towards citizen initiatives as their core strategy (Municipality of Berkelland [Gemeente Berkelland], 2010). According to the village coordinator, this promoted the adoption of new practices and with it the gaining of experience with governance experiments, as adopting new practices and acquiring new knowledge reinforced each other. With the support of an integral policy team, the village coordinator facilitated the working group in designing the *Kulturhus* plan and in obtaining governmental finances for its realisation. Following the village coordinator, it was in that time that the working group chair, the daily manager of the *Kulturhus*, as well as the local government started to collaborate more intensively and that also local organisations became increasingly involved. This is also confirmed by Bogers and Kars (2014: 26):

> *The fusion of the two primary schools into one school in one building, the disappearance of the library and the music school of the village, the leaving of the Social Wellbeing Organisation and the increasing visibility of vacancy and maintenance problems of the community centre (...) caused a change in thinking. In the meantime all accommodation owners in Beltrum realised that also their building faces decreasing use and financial incomes and that collaboration with other parties is necessary.*

Following the village coordinator, this collaboration was encouraged by inspired local leadership and the growing awareness that collaboration would offer opportunities to enhance the liveability of the village. This convinced the local government to replace the usual annual contribution to the old community centre, by a one-time financial contribution for the realisation of the *Kulturhus*. This is illustrative for the shifting interdependence, because other than the continuing subsidies to the community centre, the *Kulturhus* now was facilitated under the condition to become autonomous. The Beltrum case demonstrates that in changing relationships, events such as the financial crisis played an important role as well as the availability of competent actors among residents and policymakers. Crucial was also that the existing governance context in the municipality to which Beltrum belongs, provided a fertile ground for the development of new ideas about changing governance. At the same time, the collaborative practices supported shared learning, which induced the development of new skills and the growing confidence in the opportunities that innovative forms of governance can offer. This again promoted the further evolvement of the governance relations and practices to a higher degree of local autonomy within Beltrum and releasing of decision power by the local government (see Figure 2).

The VC of Nieuw-Dordrecht. In 1997, the local government of Emmen founded an area-oriented consultation platform in which public and semi-public organisations should address liveability issues in an integral way. The platform included the local government, represented by a village coordinator, and the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht, represented by members of *Plaatselijk Belang*. Following the interviewed civil servant, this platform

allowed the participating parties to gain experience in deliberating local issues: '*this basis helped to ensure that there was a breeding ground for empowerment, collaboration, trust, consensus and another basic attitude, also within the village of Nieuw-Dordrecht*'. However, compared to the Beltrum case, the context was less favourable for novel forms of governance with residents. Firstly, as the platform's position was outside the organisation of the municipality, most local government actors were not involved in these deliberations. Secondly, even though Nieuw-Dordrecht had about as many local associations as Beltrum, according to an interim board member of the VC and an interim project evaluation of the governmental experiment of the VC (SHARE Foundation, 2014), at the village level, there was no history of mutual collaboration and social cohesion was low.

In 2011, the consultation platform organised a workshop in Nieuw-Dordrecht about the consequences of population decline. As this induced a shared sense of urgency to take action, during subsequent platform meetings, the idea grew to realise a VC for dealing with local liveability issues. A steering group was established to further elaborate this idea, consisting of *Plaatselijk Belang*, the village coordinator, a researcher and an external advisor. Together with *Plaatselijk Belang*, the researcher designed a study with the aim to explore possibilities for the VC, as well as the level of local support for this. These developments coincided with the local government's search for new modes of collaboration with citizens, as is reflected in the policy letter 'More of society and another government' (Municipality of Emmen [Gemeente Emmen], 2010b) and the plan 'Innovation experiments' which included the VC (Municipality of Emmen [Gemeente Emmen], 2013). According to the civil servant, the simultaneous occurrence of the scientific research and the formalisation of the experiments has been essential for the governmental commitment that made the establishment of the VC possible. In the meantime, *Plaatselijk Belang* elected an interim management board with a small implementation budget and the mandate of the local government, in order to elaborate on its financial structure and to install a board which was meant to replace *Plaatselijk Belang* in the consultation platform.

After the formal foundation of the VC in 2013, however, the newly installed VC members, the members of the former *Plaatselijk Belang*, the local government, and the steering group all appeared to have envisioned the cooperative's form and legitimacy differently. As the local study eventually did not deliver the expected information, the steering group and the interim board decided to gauge the community's support for the VC through a house-to-house survey. The results of this survey were interpreted in conflicting ways: whereas the interim board concluded that there was sufficient commitment to proceed with its activities, some of the former *Plaatselijk Belang* members disagreed.

In the same period, the interim board did an unusual loan request to the local government for the demolition of a vacant building located in a central green area of the village. This event had various consequences. First, also in this occasion objections of former *Plaatselijk Belang* members and some other residents contributed to further discord towards the VC. Second, the novel loan construction of the government inspired the interim board to explore possibilities of taking control of public services and raise the autonomy of the village. Third, these aspirations motivated the local government to install a specific working group that explored the idea of citizen budgets and the possibility to install particular budget lines for villages. Meanwhile, as the interviewed interim board member recalls, various local working groups realised a number of projects (see 'The VDC of Ee' section) as proof to the residents that the VC existed.

In 2015, the tensions escalated in a serious conflict between the VC board and some of its members and induced the board to step down. After this sudden development, the newly chosen board immediately decided to dismiss the citizen budget management idea. The interviewed interim board member explained this deviation of the pathway as follows: the exploration of the

legal implications of citizen budget management had been too complex and lengthy to be well understood by a large group of residents. Meanwhile, tensions between individual key-actors continued to build up, also because the local associations were not used to collaborate.

As this development coincided with the municipal evaluation of the 'Innovation Experiments', it also convinced the local government to terminate the experiment and to put no further effort in stimulating self-steering aspirations of the VC. The differences in opinion between the government and the VC about the experiment's goals played an important role in this decision too: whereas the local government was more generally interested in developing innovative alternatives for the consultation platform, the interim board assumed that the government supported the citizen budget management of the VC. However, other than in the Beltrum case, the local government of Nieuw-Dordrecht just had started to experiment with shifting decision-making power towards local residents and had hardly any experience with novel modes of co-governance. The same was the case for the interim board members and explains why they continued to act according to the conventional hierarchical decision-making structure of the local government. Furthermore, it appeared that after the election of 2014, the newly elected government had less far-reaching aspirations to explore governance shifts than the previous one.

Altogether, an interplay of lacking experience, diverse ambitions, and moderated political willingness to elaborate on new forms of governance with residents contributed to the early termination of the experiment. This resulted in the deviation of the governance evolution path from almost realised citizen autonomy and governmental release back to the consultative role of the former *Plaatselijk Belang* with a directing role of the local government (see Figure 2). According to the interviewed interim board member, these developments produced a social division within the village between ardent proponents and opponents of taking over governmental tasks, which seriously damaged social relations and with it the liveability of the village.

The VDC of Ee. Compared to the other two cases, the municipality of Dongeradeel had a far smaller local government and hardly any history of engaging in deliberation with its rural residents. The local government realised a first (formal) institutional change in this direction in 2010 when advocating citizen consultation about liveability issues in early stages of decision making (Municipality of Dongeradeel [Gemeente Dongeradeel], 2010). It did turn out, however, that residents were not yet prepared for this at that time, as one of the interviewed civil servant reported: '*The time wasn't ripe*'. The village of Ee resembled Beltrum in terms of its strong social cohesion and high number of associations (Association of Village Interests [Vereniging Dorpsbelang Ee], 2012). This produced '*a safe basis of knowing each other*' and '*of care and attention*', '*mutual collaboration and a flourishing association life*', as an interviewed VDC member argued.

It was in this local governance context that in 2011 an unforeseen surplus of 750,000 euro of the local government presented itself, as a housing restructuration project was no longer needed due to population decline. When developing a liveability policy programme (Municipality of Dongeradeel [Gemeente Dongeradeel], 2011), the idea raised to use this surplus for finding a solution for the physically degraded and formally protected historical centres of four small scattered villages, amongst which the village of Ee. At the time, a proposal of an involved civil servant to start VDCs in these villages led to the installation of a formal working group with regional and national partners. In the following two years, this working group initiated studies of the historic development of the villages (Association of Village Interests [Vereniging Dorpsbelang Ee], 2012). Interviews with civil servants revealed that during the preparation process of the restauration plans gradually the idea developed to include residents. Consequently, the local government engaged an external advisor as

broker, first, in order to explore the particular concerns of residents about liveability issues, and, second, to identify residents to participate in the VDCs. In 2013, when the formal VDC plan was ready (Weusthuis and Partners, 2013), the regional government doubled the available budget by providing another 750,000 euro. In the plan, the responsibilities and the rules of the decision-making process had been strictly delineated and formally left hardly any room for alternative approaches for both the local government and VDC members. This joint decision-making structure had two layers of, first, a formal umbrella organisation in which the local chairs of the VDCs were seated together with government directors and, second, of four VDCs that were intended to be run by five volunteers each and were supposed to activate other residents to engage in VDC activities. The umbrella organisation should have the final say.

Following the VDC members, there was local commitment in Ee for this experiment because of the money available and the involvement of residents in the village studies: '*Normally the municipality just drops solutions, now they both offer money and space to come up with solutions ourselves. What else could you wish for?*' The high level of social cohesion within the village and the successful realisation of material projects by the VDC (see 'The Village Development Company of Ee' section) further nurtured this commitment. Along the practices, the broker facilitated informal communication between the local government and the VDC members, which promoted knowledge exchange and nurtured mutual trust. This was reflected in the interview with two VDC members:

> '*The relationship between DOM and the municipality has really changed since 2012. We are growing towards each other. It is really a collaboration, there is mutual trust and a change in thinking. A few years ago that was not the case.*' ... '*If you did a high-five with a stuck-up official, they would fall off their seats.*' ... '*There is a change from control to trust, a new balance in what to control and what to release to us. It is a kind of game, we are on the same level, we can communicate openly and there are no formalities.*'...'*The aldermen take the village chairs very seriously, they are listened to. Formally, the alderman has the decisive vote, but in practice this is not used*'... '*We put the municipality in front of our cart and they did the same with us. They do not steer the pot with money, the village has a lot of freedom.*'

Subsequently, following the interviewed VDC board members and civil servants, the local VDC gradually obtained more room for making their own decisions on allocating available public financial resources, as the umbrella organisation started accepting any proposal or action of the VDC. The local government adopted a more facilitating role towards the VDC, such as in the application for external funding. This change of decision-making roles had also become possible because of the accessibility and small size of the local administration in which the civil servants and VDC members got to know each other personally. In time, this made the brokers' interventions superfluous. Although there was no history of collaboration with residents, the re-election in 2014 of the same political constellation that shared the positive experiences with the VDCs of Ee and the three other villages, ensured that the local government and the VDC members of Ee could continue their practices on the basis of joint collaboration (see Figure 2).

Institutionalisation of shifting decision-making roles within the different municipalities

In this section, we look at how shifting decision-making roles have been institutionalised within the municipalities and how the different arrangements of this study contributed to the realised changes in governance modes.

The municipality of Berkelland and the Beltrum case. In the term of office of 2010–2014, the local government of Berkeland officially documented for the first time its aim to facilitate civic initiatives and to stimulate a higher degree of citizen self-steering. How this should be done, however, was not yet explicated, as reflected in the political agreement (Municipality of Berkelland [Gemeente Berkelland], 2010: 1–5):

> *We do not have a concrete answer to everything now, but together we do have a clear picture of that answer . . . The starting point for the coming period is: leave more to the residents themselves . . . it is also necessary to ensure mutual trust between residents and the municipality. . . In a way that plans start in society, and not because the municipality directs them. In a way that the government becomes a more equal player in social networks instead of the dominant party . . . Where the government retreats, a modern 'Noaberschap' manifests itself . . . Where an societal initiative temporarily needs (financial, organisational) support, it is our turn as municipality. It is therefore part of the new role of the municipality to make investments, so that residents/society can take up their own plans. But always with the principle that such support is temporary in nature.*

In the political agreement of the following term of office 2014–2018, the new political constellation underlines the value of the experiences made by previous one: '*The good experiences from the past mean that we have the utmost confidence that we (management and employees) will do the job together with our partners, residents, social organisations and entrepreneurs*'. It also goes a step further in ascribing residents a leading role in local development (Municipality of Berkelland [Gemeente Berkelland], 2014: 3–5):

> '*By self-steering and collaboration, residents build a living community to which everyone contributes to their ability*' . . . '*We think of residents who realise initiatives with each other and sometimes with a supporting role of organisations and local authorities*' . . . '*Residents who strive for a liveable living environment and who are really committed to it, are "owners" of their initiatives and questions. In this they deserve involvement, support and trust from the municipality and social organisations. For us, the municipality, this means above all the willingness to "release", start small-scale, deliver tailor-made solutions and make connections between various initiatives and networks*'.

The Beltrum case took place within this context of formal institutional developments. According to one of the interviewed civil servants, this case was just one of 13 initiatives within the municipality in which the local government cooperated with residents. The experiences with this case were hence not the start or single promotor of institutional change, but contributed to this together with the experiences obtained in the other villages.

From the interviews with the civil servants and the political agreements, it appears that in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008 formal institutional changes provided room for experimental experiences with the aim to solving liveability issues in the villages more effectively. These at their turn contributed to the further unfolding of the governance pathway towards governmental facilitation and release. Policy analysis (Municipality of Berkelland [Gemeente Berkelland], 2015) and interviews with civil servants indicate that it is unlikely that the municipality will return upon this pathway. Also in the near future, the concerns which motivated political change, such as public budget costs and liveability issues, will still be valid. Besides it is important that new governance modes have been further incorporated in the municipality's organisation structure and in processes of policymaking and in doing so facilitated the development of relevant skills among civil servants and stimulated civic initiatives.

The municipality of Emmen and the Nieuw-Dordrecht case. At the start of the term of office 2010–2014, the local government was still cautious about changing modes of governance with residents. The political agreement announced to proceed with the existing consultation structure, yet at the same time expressed the wish to support citizen initiatives and to develop new instruments to improve deliberations with residents (Municipality of Emmen [Gemeente Emmen], 2010a). Document analysis (Municipality of Emmen [Gemeente Emmen, 2013) and interviews with civil servants revealed that the idea of the VC inspired policymakers to use the VC for realising their political aspirations. Following an engaged civil servant, there had been a number of debates in the town hall in this period about how to involve residents in decision making. As the practices were still in their infancy, these were not yet institutionalised in the municipal organisation structure and working routines. Illustrative for this is that in the subsequent agreement of the term of office of 2014–2018, the local government showed an ambivalent attitude towards granting residents access to decision-making processes. At the one hand, it consolidated the local governments' decision-making power by maintaining its directive role in the consultation structure; at the other hand, the door for supporting civic initiatives was opened: *'Investing in the liveability and vitality of villages and neighbourhoods in deliberations with the residents. A leading and directing role for the municipality.'* (...) *Make financial means available in order to support initiatives of villages and neighbourhoods'* (Municipality of Emmen [Gemeente Emmen], 2014: 11).

Moreover, the experiences with the Nieuw-Dordrecht case led to government stimulation of citizen budget experiments elsewhere in the municipality. Whether the door will open further and how governance modes will evolve in the future remains to be seen.

The municipality of Dongeradeel and the Ee case. At the start of the term of office of 2010–2014, the local government advocated its regular directive role in handling local liveability issues while emphasising problems in the housing market. Nevertheless, the local government demonstrated interest in new modes of governance by announcing its wish to engage residents in decision making at an earlier stage than had been usual (Municipality of Dongeradeel [Gemeente Dongeradeel], 2010, 2011). The interviews with civil servants reveal that the most substantial shift took place during the design process of the VDC's project. This grew out to a plan with at its core co-governance with residents. It also aimed at using the new experiences for developing similar instruments in other villages and municipalities. (Municipality of Dongeradeel [Gemeente Dongeradeel], 2014). However, the government was still cautious and wished to remain in control, among others in selecting the residents. Upon the re-election for office 2014–2018, the positive experiences of the VDC project made the local government decide to continue on the pathway towards shifting decision-making roles in rural governance, as is reflected in the political agreement (Municipality of Dongeradeel [Gemeente Dongeradeel], 2014: 4–7):

> *'The municipality will train its employees in how to improve the support of active citizenship ... 'The municipality will be more dependent on the willingness of citizens to help each other. Sufficient housing quality and availability of facilities become fundamental issues for the villages. The villages should be looking for smart forms of cooperation around basic facilities' ... 'We come with proposals for a different role for the municipality based on good experiences elsewhere. The aim is to enable village initiatives, supported by an implementation budget' ... 'Active citizenship is expected from our residents. We need to give room for this and to move from dependency towards a reciprocal relationship between residents and the municipality.'*

Despite this firm declaration of institutional change, following the engaged civil servants, the municipality is still searching how to develop new practices and routines that contribute to the further evolution of this novel mode of governance.

Conclusions

This paper looked into the development of three governance experiments in depopulating rural areas in the Netherlands through the lens of EGT. In all three cases, local governments and residents searched to solve local liveability issues through more collaboration and by increasing residents' role in decision making. These arrangements can be seen as specific forms of deliberative or collaborative governance in which both citizens and governments participated. Using EGT theory allowed us to understand the continuous dynamics in governance arrangements and to reveal the non-linear fashion in which governance modes enfold. This is quite different than often is assumed in politics and reflected in figures such as the abovementioned ROB. This research has demonstrated that evolution may proceed in various directions with the chance of directions turning even quite drastically and unexpectedly. The continuity of governance dynamics and their unpredictability contributes importantly to our understanding of collaborative and deliberative governance which often has been analysed in terms of more or less collaboration or deliberation and conditions for successfulness – either more generally, as in the case of collaborative governance theories, or in particular decision making processes or planning projects (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Healey, 2003, 2015a; 2015b; Innes and Booher, 2004, 2010).

More in particular, the study demonstrates that decision-making roles evolved along a specific pathway in each case, with differences in the extent and direction in which responsibilities and decisive control among residents and local governments shifted. Each pathway has evolved within a unique governance context and was characterised by its own changing interdependencies of institutions, actors, power and knowledge which affected citizen–government interactions and, as such, governance transformation. The Beltrum case started as a bottom-up citizen initiative that during a few years received governmental support and then regained autonomy. In the Ee case, the initiative was started under the direction of the local government, while at the same time aiming at joint decision making with residents. In time, however, the local government turned towards a position as facilitator and backed up any initiative of involved residents. The Nieuw-Dordrecht case began as a joint initiative in which involved parties soon started searching for ways of becoming an autonomous community enterprise. However, this failed because of lacking experience both within the community and the local government and made that involved residents returned to a prior advisory position under government direction.

Although this study underlines the context dependency of governance evolution, there are also some general lessons to be learned with two main factors enhancing and obstructing the evolution towards higher levels of decision-making power of residents in rural governance. Firstly, if and how decision-making roles shift depends importantly on the readiness and preparedness of local governments to share decision-making power with citizens such as reflected in political will, the adaptation of the municipality's organisational structure and skilled civil servants. In the Beltrum case, the local government had a favourable organisation structure, years of experience of deliberating with residents and the political will to continue the pathway to governmental release towards its citizens. In the Nieuw-Dordrecht case, the local government just began to explore such role shifts, which made it more difficult for them to envision and realise change. This seriously affected the chances of the VC project to succeed and contributed to the sudden path-deviation from a new form of

co-governance and governmental release back to prior forms under government direction. In the Ee case, positive experiences with the VDC reconfirmed the local government's initial readiness and promoted the further development of skills within both the VDC and the local government. The small size and easy accessibility of the municipal organisation played an important role too. Moreover, particularly in the cases of Beltrum and Ee, the interventions of 'brokers' supported the (informal) institutionalisation of changing relationships by facilitating knowledge exchange between the involved residents and the local government. In the Nieuw-Dordrecht case instead, the 'broker' had been far less able to play a role in such change, as he functioned as the linking spill between the interim VC board and the consultation platform rather than the local government. Secondly, the commitment of local residents has been of crucial influence. In all three cases, such commitment depended both on social cohesion within the village and the tangibles outputs realised by the initiatives. In the Beltrum and Ee cases, social cohesion and local community commitment were strong to begin with and further increased when the initiatives were seen as successfully handling liveability issues. In the Nieuw-Dordrecht case, community commitment seemed warranted when tangible outputs were produced, but also due to low social cohesion this commitment crumbled and eventually collapsed when the discussion about citizen budget management raised distrust among the community.

This study demonstrates moreover that although the arrangements took place in the same period and general context (see the 'Introduction' section), the institutionalisation of role shifts between government and residents differed among the municipalities. In the Beltrum case, the institutional change got into the rapids since the term of office 2010–2014 and this was due to both the perceived urgency and the favourable existing institutional context. The newly gained experiences, also those of this case, contributed to further institutionalisation. This development is unlikely to cease in the near future. Although action was perceived to be needed also in the other two cases, the governance contexts were far less favourable for deliberations between local governments with residents. Nevertheless, in the Ee case, the positive experiences with the VDCs contributed to firm formal institutional change. In the Nieuw-Dordrecht case instead, the disappointing experimental experiences with the VC together with political reticence slowed down and attenuated formal institutional change. For both municipalities, it is still open in what direction both formal and informal institutionalisation will head to in the near future.

The comparative analysis of these cases underlines the continuity and unpredictability of governance dynamics. It shows that how projected and, hence, deliberate shifts in governance arrangements diverge from their intended path which can only be understood when following their evolution in time. This also means that it is not easy to distinguish between successes and failures. As the Nieuw-Dordrecht case demonstrates, for instance, even what emerges as failure initially may eventually trigger governance changes in the intended direction. The opposite is also possible as the case of Ee revealed. Initial successes in enabling citizen participation did not warrant a further evolution in that direction. The analysis also taught us how important it is to support intended shifts through a stepwise institutionalisation of new modes of collaboration into the governmental organisation.

Finally, it can be concluded that although new modes of governance arise in different places, their evolution differs with context-specific factors affecting the scope and direction of (in)formal institutional governance shifts at different moments and phases. How such new modes start and who takes the first initiative may differ. Sometimes, such initiatives evolve in a straightforward manner with local government granting rural communities more autonomy in local development. The evolution may, however, continue on a winding path during which roles may take unexpected turns and deviate in unforeseen directions.

These shifts can be intentional or unintentional and can take temporary or more structural forms. The different pathways of the arrangements could only be established in retrospect. The stories are never completed, as the local governance contexts will continue to evolve. However, certain pathways of changed decision-making roles seem to be more stable than others. At the arrangement level it is in that area that the extent of both formal and informal institutionalisation within municipalities and villages seem to play an important role.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

Note

1. Liveability (*leefbaarheid*) is a commonly used term in Dutch language that refers to the satisfaction with the social and physical living environment, in terms of, for example, transport and job possibilities, services, neighbourhood and housing (Gieling and Van Haartsen, 2017).

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Hiska Ubels has obtained MSc degrees both in Rural Development Sociology at the Wageningen University and Regional Studies (Cum Laude) at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences of the University of Groningen. After a 10 year-career as a planning policy officer for the Dutch State, she has obtained particular interest in co-productive governance processes, collaborative governance, governance innovation and social innovation regarding socio-spatial issues in the public domain. Her PhD research concerns experimental collaborations regarding socio-spatial liveability issues between local governments and residents in Dutch rural areas that are confronted with declining population.

Bettina Bock is professor for Population Decline and Quality of Life at the University of Groningen, Associate Professor for Rural Sociology at Wageningen University, and guest professor at Newcastle University, Centre for Rural Economy. Her areas of research include rural development and social innovation, governance, rural entrepreneurship and rural gender relations, social exclusion in rural areas, migration and sustainable agricultural development. She is the editor-in-chief of Sociologia Ruralis. She is a member of the executive committee of the European Society for Rural Sociology and the board of the International Rural Sociology Association.

Tialda Haartsen is adjunct professor of Rural Geography at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences of the University of Groningen. Her research focuses on rural change in the context of depopulation, with two specific themes of interest. The first is motives, senses of belonging and everyday life experiences of newcomers, return migrants, stayers, leavers and visitors in rural areas. The second theme relates to the impact of changes in facilities and services on rural quality of life and liveability and how local communities deal with and adapt to these changes. Citizen initiatives play an important role in these adaptation processes.