



Service provision in rural areas through citizens' initiatives

Stable alternative or a spur-of-the-moment?

Introduction

In the Netherlands, as in other European countries, decentralization of the state is occurring. This is paralleled with a shift from 'big government' to 'big society', referred to in the Netherlands as the transition to a 'Participatory Society'.



Another phenomenon taking place throughout large parts of the western world is population decline. In the Netherlands population decline is already visible in certain areas and will occur in others in the near future. As a consequence, especially in rural areas, liveability and service provision is under pressure.

In the light of these two phenomena, a more active role is expected of citizens in creating an alternative service provision. Our research focuses on:

- The way in which these citizens' initiatives work; and
- In what way they can be stimulated into success.

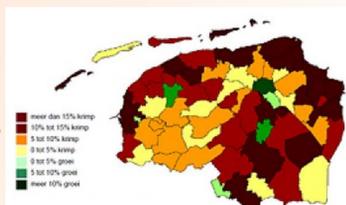
For this it is essential to establish:

- Which factors influence their success; and
- How their endurance is arranged for and guarded.

In the end we hope to be able to answer the question whether citizens' initiatives are able to create a stable alternative for disappearing services in areas characterised by population decline.

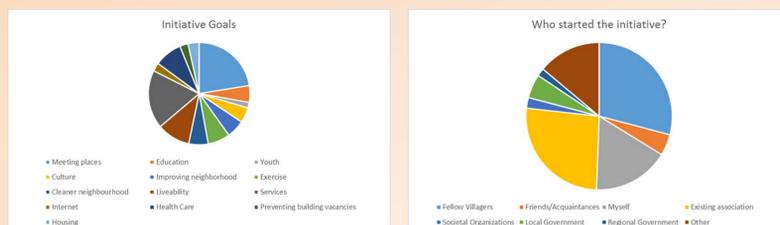
Methods

In order to be able to study the factors influencing endurance of citizens' initiatives we distributed a questionnaire amongst these initiatives in the Northern Netherlands. First an inventory of initiatives (both active and no longer active) was made based on information from local and regional governments, planning bureaus and an internet-search. Apart from this inventory the snowball-method was used. Respondents were asked whether they knew additional initiatives, which accordingly were added to the inventory (if not yet there). All in all the inventory consisted of 623 initiatives, however for 35 initiatives the contact details were incorrect or incomplete. In total 585 initiatives were approached of which 491 by e-mail and 95 through their home-address.



The inventory held several types of initiatives: community centres, green area facilities, meeting places, facilities (health care, sports, shopping, etc), broadband internet access, green energy cooperatives, housing cooperatives, prevention of housing vacancies and re-use of empty buildings. The response rate was relatively high (26,8 %). In total 157 questionnaires were completed.

Findings



Variable	Standardized Beta
Number of people involved	0,154 *
Life span in years	0,155 *
Satisfied - when goals are achieved	-0,248 **
Goals achieved	0,297 **
First initiator – Regional government	-0,175 *
Social organizations involved in supplying goods	0,136 *
Success factor – support/network/urgency	0,214 **
Success factor – knowledge/skills/time	0,166 *
Continuing initiative when currently involved stop	0,299 **
Reasons to stop - conflict	0,137
Goals - housing	0,265 **
Adjusted R2	0,440

Conclusions

Analysing these outcomes of the questionnaires we came to the following conclusions:

- First of all it seems likely that a crucial first phase exists that determines whether an initiative is enduring. Once this phase is passed, initiatives are more likely to continue in the long run. Elaborating on this, we assume it to be fruitful to focus on facilitating initiatives in this phase, in order for them to get to the next phase and continue in the long run.
- Secondly, as also was the case in our previous studies, we found the role of the government to be essential. Initiatives initiated by regional government themselves, and in a later stage taken over by other societal parties, were less likely to be enduring. This leads us to the conclusion that the relationship between governments and initiatives need to be reshaped towards a more facilitating role of the government.
- Thirdly, the goals set for an initiative determine its success and endurance. Defining long-term goals, for example providing housing facilities, influence the endurance of an initiative in a positive way, while as a side effect people get involved for the long run. Finally, initiatives are more likely to endure when they achieved interim results.