

Defining ‘Success’ of Local Citizens’ Initiatives in Maintaining Public Services in Rural Areas: A Professional’s Perspective

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Abstract

In the shift towards the Big Society, it is widely proclaimed that citizen participation and citizens’ initiatives are indispensable to maintaining services that used to be run by local or regional governments. Despite the increased interest in citizens’ initiatives, research has scarcely debated what actually defines the success of such initiatives. Using focus group discussions, this study examined the meanings and norms collectively constructed by government officials and professionals regarding the success and failure of citizens’ initiatives in rural areas. Remarkably, we found that the professional perspective of successful citizens’ initiatives was not dominated by the achievement of actual policy targets or project goals, such as maintaining public services. Rather, an initiative was perceived as successful as long as citizens are continuously active and in charge. Arguably, this somewhat paternalistic professional view of successful citizens’ initiatives could be challenged by the volunteers in those initiatives.

Introduction

Citizens have contributed to their communities in both urban and rural contexts as far back as the late Middle Ages (De Moor 2008), and infinite examples of citizens volunteering can be found (Weisbrod 1977; Zeleny 1979; Bloom and Kilgore 2003; Sellick 2014). Today, in the western world, citizens’ initiatives attract considerable interest (Dekker and van den Broek 1998; Fyfe and Milligan 2003; Bailey and Pill 2015; Bock 2016). Transferring responsibilities from governments to citizens, the transition from ‘Big Government’ to ‘Big Society’ has spread throughout Europe, including the Netherlands (Tonkens 2009; Lowndes and Pratchett 2012; Kampen

et al. 2013; König 2015). In the Netherlands, this transition is also referred to as the shift towards the 'Participation Society' (Central Government 2013), in which citizens are expected to become more active in resolving societal issues (Tonkens 2006; Houwelingen et al. 2014; Sellick 2014). The Participation Society has followed from the restructuring of the welfare state and austerity measures, which have required and advocated more active citizen participation. Transferring the responsibility for their living environment, and therefore service provision, to citizens has led to a discussion on role change where (local) governments relinquish responsibilities and citizens attain more influence.

In many European rural areas, the shift towards the Participation Society has coincided with an ageing and declining population, which has caused governments to struggle to maintain public services. The centralisation of services often appears to be a solution to this problem, but it leads to the relocation and closure of services (Dam et al. 2006; Woods 2006; Van Steen and Pellenbarg 2010). Citizens' initiatives are often proposed as alternative solutions to address threatened government service provision or the closure of facilities (Jones and Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Cheshire and Woods 2009; Healey 2015). In addition to meeting the everyday needs of the inhabitants of rural areas, such initiatives contribute to enhancing the sense of community (Simon et al. 2007; Vermeij and Mollenhorst 2008; Brereton et al. 2011; Oude Vrielink and Verhoeven 2011; Leidelmeijer 2012; Bailey and Pill 2015).

The consequences of the Participation Society with regard to the new roles of citizens is a widely researched topic and includes various conceptualisations of essentially the same phenomenon, such as community-led local development initiatives, grassroots initiatives, social innovation, bottom-up social enterprise and social cooperatives (Kelly and Caputo 2006; Fazzi 2011; Brandsen and Helderman 2012; Bosworth et al. 2015; Bock 2016; Li et al. 2016). We use the term citizens' initiatives in this paper, defining them as *formally or informally organised groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain*. Citizens' initiatives differ from citizen participation, which refers to citizens' involvement in local governance (May 2007). By citizens' initiatives, we mean projects in which citizens take the initiative to actively achieve a specific goal together, such as preventing the closure of a local supermarket, maintaining public green areas or creating a small local housing corporation (Brannan et al. 2006; Rosol 2012; Calderwood and Davies 2013). In such initiatives, the main objective of citizens is to replace an existing facility or prevent one from disappearing.

Due to the changing roles resulting from the Participation Society, local and regional governments have a political interest in supporting successful initiatives. However, our understanding of what makes a citizens' initiative successful (or the reverse, what makes it unsuccessful) is limited. Thus far, few studies have attempted to explore how the success of citizens' initiatives is conceptualised. Studies on the performance of similar organisations, such as public networks, emphasise their complexity (Herranz 2010). Several scholars have worked towards an abstract understanding of success in the area of community participation (e.g., Wandersman 2009; Calderwood and Davies 2013; Bosworth et al. 2015) but have left the specific context of citizens' initiatives unaddressed. The conditions and indicators of success are also well described in the literature (Nowell and Boyd 2014; Taló et al. 2014; Munoz et al.

2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016), but these studies do not examine how success is conceptualised.

We believe that it is relevant to investigate how the success and failure of citizens' initiatives can be conceptualised from various perspectives to ensure that initiators and local and regional governments are on the same level of understanding. In this paper, we specifically focus on the perspective of government officials and professionals to gain an understanding of how they conceive successful citizens' initiatives. Success requires that citizens' initiatives, policy and development plans be attuned (Li et al. 2016), including the expectations between and among stakeholders. These expectations are based on stakeholders' perceptions of success. The perspectives of government officials and professionals are important since they decide on policy related to citizens' initiatives or must work with and facilitate them.

This study was conducted in rural areas in the northern Netherlands. There are more citizens' initiatives in rural areas than urban areas in the Netherlands because of the pressure that population decline places on the number and quality of facilities and services (Houwelingen et al. 2014). Although population decline figures are generally lower in the Netherlands than in more traditional depopulating rural areas in Europe, Dutch planners and policymakers do feel a sense of urgency to develop strategies and plan for decline (Haartsen and Venhorst 2010). We will start our paper with a review of the literature on the conditions and indicators of initiatives' success. Then, we will discuss the research method, which used focus groups of professionals from local and regional governments, planning offices and housing corporations. The results section will present the various ways in which these Dutch professionals collectively constructed norms and values regarding the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. In the concluding discussion, we compare the views of the professionals with the existing body of literature.

Conditions and indicators of success

As discussed in the introduction, research has scarcely examined the question of what defines a successful citizens' initiative. We therefore theorise success based on literature that focuses on the conditions for and indicators of success for citizen participation or projects comparable to citizens' initiatives. Provan and Milward's (2001) model for evaluating the effectiveness of public service delivery networks offers a good point of departure for understanding the conceptualisation of success. Although their model is aimed at networks of multiple organisations and we focus on singular initiatives, evaluating their performance reveals parallels. Citizens' initiatives are usually part of a greater network, and their activities are characterised by working together (within the initiative) and working with other parties (outside the initiative). Provan and Milward also indicated that evaluating networks addresses the same issues as evaluating a single organisation within a network.

Provan and Milward (2001) argued that effectiveness should be measured at three levels: community, network and organisation/participant. Community-level effectiveness refers to the contribution of the public service delivery network to the community. Network effectiveness refers to the interorganisational relationships that must

be present for the network to be sustainable. Finally, joining the network should benefit individual agents. According to Provan and Milward, effectiveness at all three levels of analysis should be achieved for a network as a whole to be effective.

Provan and Milward's framework (2001) was extended by the work of Herranz (2010). He argued that the types of organisations in a network (i.e., public, non-profit or for-profit) influence the behaviour of organisations and networks as a whole and thus determine their (un)successful performance. Therefore, organisation type should be considered in performance evaluations. Herranz distinguished among three types of organisational strategic orientation: bureaucratic, entrepreneurial and community. Citizens' initiatives are considered organisations with a community strategy. To further develop our theoretical understanding of success, we compared the literature on the conditions for success and the performance of various types of citizens' initiatives based on the three levels of effectiveness distinguished by Provan and Milward (Table 1).

Community-level effectiveness

While community-level effectiveness is determined by output, it is also determined by the needs within a community. Herranz (2010) related community-level effectiveness with output using job replacement rates and perceived service integration as indicators. He found that job replacement has a low influence on initiatives' success. No other studies on citizens' initiatives had examined this relationship. This finding is not unexpected considering the voluntary nature of participating within an initiative and the goals of an initiative. However, he found a relationship between initiatives' success and the perceived service integration indicator. This indicator attracted more support in the literature than Herranz's other indicators.

Service integration can be regarded as an output-based criterion for success that considers how the needs of a community are met. The urgency of an initiative appears to determine its success (Bock 2016). When the need for an alternative service is high, the likelihood of a successful outcome becomes greater. Saleminck (2016) built a model for the different development stages of citizens' initiatives that focus on providing broadband internet. Several stages of development in this model refer to the role of communities and how their needs can be met; these stages include incentive, familiarisation, bundling demand, construction and commissioning, and management and maintenance. Addressing a local need has also been found to be an important indicator for success, resulting in innovation of the targeted service and market when local voices are included (Bosworth et al. 2015; Bosworth et al. 2016). Related to the organisational context, Vickers (1965) offered a model containing four dimensions of success and failure in organizations. One of these dimensions of success is optimising functional performance. Seeking to optimise the impact on the chosen field, this dimension is also called 'functional success', which refers to success as the optimal output to be achieved.

In addition to output-based success indicators, sense of community appears to play a role at the community level. While a sense of community does not equal or guarantee the success of initiatives, it appears to be one of several conditions for

Table 1: Theoretical approaches to successful citizens' initiatives using the Provan and Milward (2001) evaluation framework

	Provan and Milward (2001)	Community level	Network level	Organisation/participant level
Herranz (2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low job placement rates • High perceived service integration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low broad business connections • Moderately strong relationship with business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low financial resource acquisition • High costs of delivering unit of service 	
Vickers (1965)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimising functional performance (achieving goals) 	–	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining dynamic balance • Optimising self-maintenance • Maximising flow of resources
Calderwood and Davies (2013)	–	–	–	–
Taló et al. (2014); Nowell and Boyd (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of community 	–	–	–
Bock (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fulfilling community demands • Collective action • Addressing local needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key intermediaries negotiating power relations 	–	–
Bosworth et al. (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product innovation • Market innovation • Incentive • Familiarisation • Bundling demand • Construction & commissioning • Management & maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Input innovation • Process innovation • Inventory of demand • Campaigning • Bundling demand • Tendering and contracting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisation innovation 	–
Bosworth et al. (2016)	–	–	–	–
Salemink (2016)	–	–	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social capital • Learning experiences • Ownership • Familiarisation • Skills

success. A strong sense of community increases participation levels (Nowell and Boyd 2014; Taló et al. 2014). When people feel connected to and responsible for their community, they are more likely to contribute to that community by, for instance, being active in a citizens' initiative.

Network-level effectiveness

Network-level effectiveness is determined by the relationships between citizens' initiatives and other organisations or institutions. Although these relationships appear to be of lesser importance in the work of Herranz (2010), who found a moderate effect of these relationships with business, other studies indicate that the network plays a significant role. The work of Calderwood and Davies (2013) described community retail enterprises and related their success to the network level. These enterprises allow facilities (village shops) to remain available while being run by the community. One element of success that was mentioned was a strong relationship between a shop and the community it serves. This strong link does not specifically entail a relationship with other businesses, but it does entail a relationship with stakeholders in the network.

The importance of relationships with external parties with regard to network-level effectiveness was confirmed in other studies. Bosworth et al. (2015) indicated how the relationship between top-down actors and communities are important for success. Negotiating power relationships was found to be an important role for key intermediaries. Bosworth et al. (2016) furthermore established how good network relations contribute to input and process innovation. The network also plays a role in inventorying community needs and finding parties to address those needs (Salemink 2016).

Organisation/participant-level effectiveness

Finally, organisation/participant-level effectiveness relates to the different types of resources necessary for successful initiatives. Herranz (2010) proposed two indicators of organisation/participant-level effectiveness: financial resource acquisition and the cost of delivering the unit of service. The three remaining dimensions in the Vickers model (1965) relate to the organisation-level effectiveness proposed by Provan and Milward. The three dimensions – maintaining dynamic balance, optimising self-maintenance, and maximising the flow of resources – refer to financial and other resources and the need to balance them. A drawback to Vickers's work is that it does not clearly indicate to what extent the dimensions must be present for an initiative to be successful.

Looking at organisation/participant-level effectiveness more closely, the role of human resources surfaces: a number of skills and individual achievements are needed for an initiative to become successful. These attributes also benefit initiative participants as they learn new skills and experience personal development. Expanding social capital, expanding knowledge, gaining experience in running an initiative and having

a sense of ownership with regards to the initiative are examples of such skills (Bosworth et al. 2015; Salemink 2016).

In summary, the conditions and indicators of success can be framed using the three levels distinguished by Provan and Milward. We conclude that at the community level, citizens' initiatives should produce output that addresses the community's needs. At the network level, relationships with other parties and the community contribute to the success of an initiative. Finding resources and developing skills are effective at the organisation/participant level. So far, little is known about the perspectives of success among different stakeholder groups and the differences and similarities between those perspectives. This research explores the perspective of professionals on successful citizens' initiatives in focus group sessions in depopulating rural areas of the Netherlands.

Focus group research

To empirically explore conceptualisations of success, we applied focus group research, as this method is suitable for eliciting shared norms and views (Hennink et al. 2011; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2014). The focus group discussions provided insight into how professionals working for public and quasi-public institutions collectively construct complex understandings of the success (and failure) of citizens' initiatives.

Research area and selected sample of focus group participants

A total of three focus group discussions were conducted in the three northern provinces of the Netherlands: Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe. Most rural parts of these provinces are currently experiencing depopulation. Based on a selected sample, potential participants were invited to the focus group discussion. Participant selection was based on two criteria: they had to be professionally involved in citizens' initiatives, and they had to work in the research area. With the help of informants at local and regional government services from the three northern provinces and other researchers in our research area, we compiled a list of 51 names. We made sure that all the provinces and professions were represented equally when preparing the list.

All people on our list received an invitation to participate in the focus group discussions, and 43 responded. Eight responses were negative because the respondents felt the topic did not relate to their expertise or because they lacked time. We received 35 positive responses.

Based on the respondents' availability and location preference, we chose to run three focus group meetings, one in each of the provinces. The groups were arranged with larger numbers than usual to allow for the possibility of absentees and because of the exploratory character of this research (Hennink et al. 2011). The group size initially ranged from eight to 11 participants, and five to nine were present at the actual focus group discussions. A total of 23 people participated in the focus group discussions (eight men and 15 women). The sessions took 2 hours each, on average. Since participants' backgrounds and the areas where they worked were distributed quite

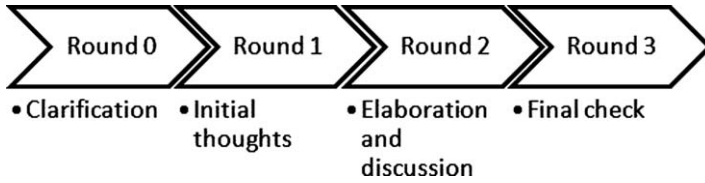


Figure 1: *Focus group discussion structure*

evenly among the groups, we trusted that the groups were representative during the discussions.

All participants were involved with citizens' initiatives that focused on replacing services and facilities and depopulation in their everyday work. However, they had different professional backgrounds; they worked, for example, as government officials from local and regional governments, researchers at local planning offices, regional directors and housing corporation staff. The researchers from the local planning offices played dual roles in their work: They were researching the depopulating areas and also working more directly in guiding and supporting citizens' initiatives (e.g., in assisting with grant applications).

Although the participants were experts in the field, in some cases, they also had other experience in citizens' initiatives. Some participants mentioned that they were personally active in initiatives, and others had witnessed them in the areas where they lived. This duality emerged during the sessions when participants described their personal and non-work-related experiences. During the discussions, the participants were asked mainly to draw upon their professional perspectives. However, this suggested that there is a thin line between professional and personal perspectives, which is important to consider during the analysis.

Structuring the focus group discussion

During the focus group discussion, the participants described different meanings and aspects of success in citizens' initiatives. The main question the researcher asked was 'What is success and what is failure, as the counterpart to success, in citizens' initiatives?' The participants discussed which aspects they perceived as important for the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. They also discussed whether there was a hierarchy in the importance of the aspects and how the aspects were related.

The discussion within the focus groups was structured into three rounds (see Figure 1). Before starting the three rounds, the researchers presented a definition of citizens' initiatives (Round 0): citizens' initiatives are '*formally or informally organised groups of citizens who are active and contribute to the public domain*'. They also provided a few examples of initiatives to ensure that all professionals were considering the same kind of initiatives, namely, citizens' initiatives that focus on replacing (public) services, taking care of public (green) areas or contributing to liveability in another form.

It was clear that the dominance of the researcher role needed to be mitigated from the very beginning to allow the participants to take the lead in the discussion. A

number of participants did not agree with the definition of citizens' initiatives straight off. The meaning and scope of 'public domain' generated a particularly lively debate. Some participants stated that in the rural context of the northern Netherlands, this included not only public services but also privately owned spaces, such as front gardens. The maintenance of these spaces by citizens' initiatives serves not only the property owners but also the community. It also boosts the market value of the homes in a neighbourhood.

Once all participants had agreed on the definition of citizens' initiatives, the first round of the discussion started. During the first round, the participants were asked to define initiatives' success and failure in one or two words. They were given a brief period to think before being invited to present their ideas. All aspects they mentioned were written on a whiteboard to further structure the discussion. Some participants said that they had thought of the same things that others had mentioned, thus illustrating the hierarchy of some of the aspects.

In the second round, the participants further explained their conceptualisations of the success and failure of citizens' initiatives. They also discussed the importance of some of the elements that emerged during the first round. The aspects mentioned most often and discussed in the most detail were deemed the aspects most important for success. Most participants agreed on these aspects as determinants for success and failure.

The third and final round allowed the participants the opportunity to assess whether anything had been overlooked, whether their views had changed, or whether new information had been added during the discussion. In general, no new aspects were added in the final round.

During the discussion, the moderator took a passive role, allowing the participants to choose the direction of the discussion. The moderator summarised what had been said and asked for clarifications, if necessary. This approach allowed the participants to 'take over' and provided the researchers with a rich understanding of their views (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2014).

Analysis of the focus group discussion

The sessions were videotaped with the participants' permission and then transcribed. Names and other markers of identity were removed from the transcripts to guarantee anonymity. Pseudonyms are used for the participants in the following analysis. The transcripts were analysed using the Atlas.ti qualitative research software package. To guarantee validation, two researchers coded the material independently and compared their findings. In coding the transcripts, they paid attention to what the participants considered successes and failures and how they collectively constructed meanings and norms regarding the citizens' actions and attitudes. The aim of the coding was also to discover aspects of the changing roles of governments and citizens as a result of the Participation Society. Five important aspects emerged as dominant: the importance of the process and the kind of activity, the success of discontinued initiatives, the people who should be in charge, the assessment of failure, and the assessment of financial aspects, initiative size and citizen skills. The following section

discusses these themes in greater detail. We will refer to the participants of the focus group discussion as 'our professionals' to prevent confusion with participants of a citizens' initiative and professionals who were not part of the focus group discussion.

Results

Process and collective action

According to our professionals, the process of citizens contributing to an initiative is more important than achieving the goals the initiative sets. An initiative is successful when it is active and when there is some form of output. This attitude towards success emerged in all three sessions and was supported by almost all our professionals.

Daniel: 'It is important to create community support, a sense of community [...], that is a big win when it happens. Especially in areas where it is less self-evident, an initiative like that in such neighbourhoods can be of great importance. And perhaps then, I think, the process is of greater importance than the ultimate, the ultimate goal'.

What Daniel, a researcher at a local planning office, says here shows that he considers the process of being involved in an initiative to be more important than the achievement of its original goals. Success lies in the process and the benefits that can result from side effects, such as the sense of community mentioned here. During the discussion, our professionals also mentioned benefits such as organisational skills, professional networks and social capital.

Miranda: 'It is more about the process and about satisfaction with the process, being in motion. You can see that a lot; it is not about the goal of a multifunctional centre or narrowing the road, let's say, whether that is achieved'.

This professional, a housing corporation staff member, stresses the importance of citizens being active within the initiative. Many of our professionals argued that the results are less important than both the process and the collective action of the citizens, as the discussion quoted below illustrates.

Olivia: [Talking about a project that should have become very large] 'Well, now it has been split up into little bits. And it is not the success that it was supposed to be, I think. But the little parts and the process were very successful indeed. And then, the question remains, is that a problem?'

Emily: 'The free-styling, I think that it is also very important. That you can switch between different things [...].'

Isabelle: 'But then you should say, it is not the issue whether your original goal has been met but whether there is a result. And that can be in little parts, too. I think getting results might be very important'.

This fragment of the discussion shows that these professionals, a government official and two societal organization advisors, were less concerned about the goals the initiative had initially planned to accomplish. The goals and outcomes may be adjusted during the process. To them, it was more important for the initiative to

produce some type of result or outcome, resulting from collective action, than to achieve the original goals. This relates to the earlier comments about the importance of being in motion. When discussing citizens' initiatives that focus on the public domain and the replacement of a service or facility, our professionals viewed goal achievement as subordinate as long as the initiative produces some kind of output.

The role of social learning

In all three sessions, our professionals made striking comments about the relationship between actions and success. Our professionals always viewed bottom-up progress in a community as a good thing. Even when an initiative stopped or failed for whatever reason, it was still considered successful because of the social learning experiences. The following quotes elaborate on this view.

Ethan: '[...] If you decide not to continue, this might nevertheless be a success because you sorted things out, and you went on an adventure. But you can arrive at the conclusion that it is not possible, or it is too risky, or we haven't got the money, or whatever [to continue]. And then you say, based on arguments: we have to quit now. And that is not failure but making a sensible decision. I think'.

Ethan, a researcher at a local planning office, illustrates that even when an initiative is stopped and activity ceases, it does not automatically mean that the initiative has failed. There may be good reasons for discontinuing an initiative. If stopping the initiative is properly thought through, it can still be considered successful because collective action is also an informal learning process that creates a sense of community, as the following statement illustrates:

Olivia: '[...] well, when is it not a success? We often see things that did not work out, or were stopped, or went bankrupt [...] But those people have learned so much. So the process in itself has been a success if you consider the timespan we expect from governments and citizens. Compared to that, what we are doing is not at all bad. The pioneering in itself is already a great success'.

Olivia again stresses the importance of the process. Participants in an initiative can learn much from their participation and as a result improve their skills, such as organising activities, communicating with different kinds of people, or interacting with the government. These social learning processes were highly valued by the interviewed government officials and professionals. Therefore, they collectively constructed success by referring to initiatives being a success in general because the 'side effects' always result in benefits for the participants in an initiative or for the community they live in. In one of the sessions, Brian illustrated this by explaining that the participants in an initiative '[...] got to know each other; they formed a group and became active together. Thus, a kind of togetherness was created through which people sought to deal with the future'.

This meaning can be related to the aspects of success our professionals previously mentioned: process and collective action. Citizens and communities benefit by contributing to the process of an initiative and the realisation of collective action.

Empowerment

In addition to this meaning, our professionals agreed on another aspect of success: empowerment. Citizens themselves – not a local government or another institution – need to be in charge of an initiative.

Oscar: 'What I am trying to say is that granting authority, enabling the people themselves to be in charge will not automatically make a citizens' initiative good. But a good citizens' initiative, I think will get stuck if the citizens are not in charge'.

Like Oscar, a consultant on demographic change, many of our professionals argued that government support through funding or expertise is fine, but the decision-making and leadership should be in the hands of citizens. However, this is complicated for local government officials. On the one hand, they want to transfer responsibilities to citizens, and they appreciate it when citizens take over former public tasks. On the other hand, government officials are often too eager to 'help' citizens as much as they can. A side effect of their eagerness is that they end up taking over the initiative. Hannah, a researcher at a local planning office, illustrates this attitude:

Hannah: 'Another thing which is important to me, something I notice local government officials tend to do with good intentions, is helping, generally speaking. They see an initiative and think, well, we are going to facilitate this a lot. And then they facilitate in such a way that they take over the initiative. They have the positive intention of "We are going to help you" rather than "You cannot do it", but in the end, they start doing so much that the inhabitants think, "Well, who's doing this exactly?"'

This quotation demonstrates that local and regional governments still play an important role in citizens' initiatives, which results in the risk of local and regional governments taking over the leadership of an initiative. Our professionals argued that governments should support initiatives without taking the lead away from the initiators.

Assessment of failure

The discussion in all three focus group sessions focused more on the aspects of success than on the aspects of failure. However, three aspects of failure did emerge, some explicitly and others related to the aspects of success mentioned here.

First, the counterparts of the first three aspects of success define failure, meaning citizens not partaking in the collective action and process and not being in charge of the initiative. Our professionals viewed an initiative as a failure if there is no activity, nothing happens and no one contributes. Oscar referred to this state as the initiative being 'without consequence'. An initiative taken over by local government, third-sector or other organisation was qualified as a failure because it then ceased to be of and by the citizens. However, support and guidance from other organisations or government was not considered a failure as long as the decision-making and execution remained in the hands of the citizens.

A second aspect of failure that emerged concerns the safety of communities. Our professionals stressed that an important condition for failure is some sort of damage

to others or the living environment. Safety should be guaranteed at all times. This entails physical safety, such as protection from violence or damage, but also psychosocial safety, or the inclusion of all groups. Local and other levels of government play a role in monitoring and guaranteeing this safety.

Finally, community support played a role in the success-failure discussion. If a large number of community members do not support an initiative, it was also perceived as unsuccessful. Not all community members need to be happy with the initiative, but most of our professionals did think that the initiative should serve a purpose and that it should have broader support than its initiators; otherwise, there is no point in starting it and carrying it out. An initiative should therefore be relevant and be supported locally. In talking about success, the role of relevance and support was mentioned but did not stand out much; therefore, it appears that an absence of relevance and support is of greater importance than the amount of support in general.

Assessment of finances, initiative size and skills

Although most citizens' initiatives are at least partly funded by local government, charities or investors, our professionals left financial issues almost unmentioned. The only times finances became a topic of discussion was when one of our professionals commented on how striking it was that, so far, nobody had brought up financing. This occurred in two of the three focus group sessions. After these comments, the discussion quickly returned to another topic. Apparently, the costs of an initiative, the financial resources needed for activities, or whether the initiative is government supported or not, do not matter in determining whether an initiative is a success or a failure. Efficiency and effectiveness in spending financial resources were not brought up or discussed. Our professionals evidently felt that it was acceptable for initiatives to have financial costs that they cannot always cover themselves and thus need funding.

Another aspect that emerged during the discussion was the size of an initiative. Initiatives take many forms and sizes, and this is important when considering their success.

Hannah: 'But this is a very large initiative apparently, though it's only sweeping the streets in groups [...] That is also something I have trouble coming to terms with: people are eager to turn everything into something very big. And I feel like, let the flowers bloom, all the little bits can grow into something bigger or the little bits are fine too'.

Our professionals also mentioned various other examples of large and small initiatives. They were aware that the bigger the initiative, the more skills are required both from them and from citizens. A larger size is related to a greater risk of failure and a greater need for more investments at the start of an initiative. This means that size is an important factor when considering success and failure.

Related to the size of an initiative, our professionals also considered the amount of time and skills required for the initiative to be a success.

Claire: 'That reminds me, I am involved with volunteers setting up a cooperative. And that requires quite a lot – think of time, knowledge and skills. [...] And knowledge does not always mean college knowledge but that you know where to go to get things done. That you are not afraid to sit at a table with a housing corporation manager and [...] Well, I think that is quite something [...] And it will be different when it is about taking over the maintenance of green spaces, so it will not be the case for all initiatives. But those processes can be a lot slower than initially thought. And when I see the amount of time people put into it, as volunteers, well, I really admire that'.

This quotation, from a consultant at a societal organisation, illustrates that it is unlikely that an initiative will succeed without these skills, which are an absolute condition for the success of an initiative and relate to the perception of success. Our professionals acknowledged that the demands on citizens correspond to the size of the initiative.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to work towards a conceptualisation of success regarding citizens' initiatives from a professional perspective. Comparing our findings to the theoretical three-level framework for success, some similarities and differences were found. We will discuss our findings per level below.

Success at the community level referred to producing outputs that address community needs. Given that initiatives are expected to replace former public services, a focus on achieving goals was anticipated. However, it appears that our professionals judged the process and the positive side effects of it as more important than achieving the goals themselves. These Dutch professionals perceived citizens' initiatives in rural areas as successful simply based on the extent to which citizens were continuously active and in charge, without referring to the output. Addressing community needs, the other element at the community level did receive support in these findings. The community being in charge, and in this sense addressing its own needs, was found to be an aspect of success. Establishing a sense of community was deemed by our professionals to be an important effect of citizens' initiatives, resulting from the process of citizens collaborating; therefore, it was found to play a role in the conceptualisation of success.

Determining success at the network level did not receive much support from our professionals. Network-level effectiveness refers to relationships with other parties outside the initiative. Networking activities received little attention during the discussion. The only reference made to these network relationships occurred while discussing the side effects of citizens' initiatives. Expanding personal networks and building relationships with other parties were viewed as positive side effects and hence as part of the success of citizens' initiatives.

The discussion of the 'side effects' of citizens' initiatives also concerned the organisation/participant level, and in this context, the side effects were strongly supported by our findings. Social learning experiences and developing skills were regarded by our professionals as important effects. Our professionals perceived the value of these skills and learning experiences to be so high that even if an initiative's goals were not achieved, the initiative was successful if the initiators learned from the process.

Another element at the organisation/participant level was financial resources. However, the role of financial resources received little attention during the discussion, illustrating that this element was perceived as unimportant in conceptualising success.

The understanding of failure was noteworthy. The scant attention paid to failure in the literature based on our literature review is consistent with the view of a large proportion of our professionals. They paid little attention to conceptualising failure, and the overall shared view among our professionals was that an initiative is always successful because of the learning experiences, community building and empowerment it affords.

Overall, we can conclude that professionals who work in Dutch depopulating rural areas generally conceptualise the success of citizens' initiatives based on the organisation/participant level, where learning experiences and developing skills are important. It is remarkable that our participants conceptualised success in a rather soft way, neglecting the importance of goal achievement at the community level. This could be because the relationship between achieving goals and success is complicated. Achieving goals appears to be more implicitly important. Instead of achieving the more practical goals set, our professionals appeared to distinguish the side effects and value them more highly; these effects concern constructing a sense of community and social learning. Both of these underlying goals were considered a result of the process and contributed to explaining why initiatives were regarded as 'always successful'. From a professional perspective, the goals of an initiative therefore appear to be not those set by the initiative itself but those regarding the creation of a sense of community and liveability. On the one hand, this perception of success is related to a romantic view of citizenship, where a sense of community is the ultimate goal. This view is likely to be considered naïve and perhaps even paternalistic when the views of other stakeholders are taken into account. On the other hand, our professionals believed that to stimulate more citizens' initiatives in the Participation Society, learning skills and building community are essential for initiatives to succeed. In addition to their material output, initiatives can succeed through their immaterial output and contribute to and help build the Participation Society.

Discussion

Our professionals' conceptualisation of success here can be qualified as 'soft'. Compared to definitions of initiatives' success in the literature, our professionals expected relatively little from citizens' initiatives in terms of goal achievement in order to label them as successful. One explanation for this 'softer' evaluation of success is that the shift to the Participation Society has also brought about some humility among professionals, who do not want to judge the citizens' efforts too harshly or ask too much of them. Heaping greater responsibilities on citizens and expecting more from them has potentially made professionals more hesitant to judge; they may want to avoid putting excessive pressure on citizens' initiatives and want to appreciate their efforts. It is also in their interest to encourage resilient behaviour among citizens, given the changing environment in rural areas. Their modest expectations might change over

time, if both professionals and citizens become better adjusted to these new roles. It will be interesting to see how professionals regard success or failure of citizens' initiatives in ten years, when the Participation Society has developed further.

Another explanation is accountability. The discrepancy between governments having to let go and still remaining accountable illustrates that the current government system is not well prepared for the shift towards the Participation Society (Flinders and Moon 2011; Scientific Council for Government Policy 2013). Issues regarding accountability are also still widely discussed in the literature related to the Participation Society (e.g., Jones and Little 2000; Wiseman 2006; Uitermark 2015). Local governments might still have to conform to national and other legislation; this makes it impossible to transfer responsibilities and therefore conditions citizens' initiatives, at least for now, to be more supplementary to existing policies rather than to stand alone. This complementary outlook on citizens' initiatives may explain why their output in terms of achieving goals was found not by our professionals to be of great importance.

The shift towards the Participation Society has not fully taken place, as illustrated by some of the traditional roles that are still present. Governments have a say in which initiatives are subsidised and which are not and therefore decide which initiatives are more likely to succeed. Financial resources are usually needed for an initiative to roll out its activities. However, during the discussions, our professionals stressed many times that citizens and not (local) governments should be in charge of initiatives. By deciding on the allocation of these resources to particular initiatives, governments thus retain a selection tool, and with this power to select, they can still exercise a more paternalistic role.

In light of the changing roles related to the shift towards the Participation Society, our professionals did not seem to be fully able to foresee the efforts and risk-taking that are required from citizens. Our professionals referred to different scales of initiatives that require higher or lower skills levels. More complicated initiatives carry with them more risks for the people involved in terms of liability and the time and effort needed. Our professionals appeared to perceive the involvement of citizens as self-evident. However, the soft evaluation of success and the relegation of goal achievement to the background seem disproportionate to the efforts and risk-taking of citizens. There are financial and other risks involved in initiatives, especially in larger-scale initiatives. From this perspective, focusing only on people's level of activity and not the results they achieve is a limited way of approaching success.

This study focused on the perspectives of professionals operating in Dutch rural areas, which raises the question of how well these findings represent citizens' initiatives in other contexts. Governance structures, geographical contexts, cultural aspects and rural structures differ in other places and may influence the perception of success among various stakeholder groups. However, ultimately, the question remains: Who decides what success is, and who owns success in the Participation Society? The meaning ascribed to success and failure by active citizens may differ from the perspective of the respondents in this study since they want to achieve the goals they initially set out to achieve. The perception of success of both active and non-active citizens will be the subject of further research on citizens' initiatives.

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